



Gavin Blair Safaris

Adventures Through Africa

September 2006 Newsletter

Gavin Blair Safaris

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Latest safari news from Gavin and Marjorie

Zambia is rapidly improving its tourism infrastructure, its economy is rebounding, and new tourist areas are opening up while old established destinations are becoming better known - and there is an atmosphere of enthusiasm and excitement about the future. Even so, Zambia is a tough place to operate in, with its long and heavy rainy seasons, long distances between areas, and difficult communications and supply routes - so there is still a sense of adventure in travelling here.



We began the first of two Zambia safaris in Livingstone, the town on the Zambian side of Victoria Falls, from where we flew two hours north up the length of the Kafue National Park.



Some years ago with the same guest we had undertaken this journey by vehicle, and it had taken us the equivalent of three hard days driving! The southern section of the park is still virtually inaccessible and underutilised, but the northern area has been discovered. Our first nights stop was at a small camp on a tributary to the Kafue River, and after a late lunch we headed downstream by boat to see puku, hippos and crocodiles, and to find an elephant standing in the river and feeding under the cliffs of overhanging trees. We enjoyed sunset from a

wide spot on the river where we were treated to a rare scene - a full moon rising from the middle of the river downstream, while the sun set in the middle of the river upstream. With the sunset over we headed to the shore and climbed up the steep bank to the waiting open game driving vehicle for a night drive back to camp. Puku, which in Zambia takes over the role from the impala as being the most frequently seen antelope, were giving their loud whistling alarm call - but on homing in all we could find were fresh lion tracks. We also saw a number of hippos heading out for their evenings feasting, and it was their deep footprints set hard in the earth that made the ride so bouncy!



We started the following day with an early morning walk amongst numerous puku, and fields full of short spiky termite mounds with parrots squawking overhead. A breeding herd of elephants were heading off to some distant feeding ground as we returned to camp for a quick breakfast. We then began the long drive into the heart of the North Kafue National Park - the Busanga plains. The road is an adventure and an experience in itself, but at the moment is the only way into this treasure of an area. Every year the vast savannah is flooded and becomes totally inaccessible - the huge herds of lechwe are forced to the swampy shallows around the wooded fringes, while all other wildlife moves to the better drained areas of the park. When the water recedes it leaves a fertile grassy haven that can then support an abundance of grazing animals, that in turn supports the many predators, the first of whom we spotted as we neared the camp

- a lioness walking away from the descending vultures and the remains of a lechwe carcass.

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As there had been good rains earlier in the year the main artery of the swamps was still flooded, so necessitating a canoe transfer across to another vehicle for the last short drive to the 8 bedded camp, nestled into a tiny grove of trees on a small hummock, and surrounded by a vast plain of grass and feeding lechwe.



Over the next few days and nights our wildlife viewing activities had us bumping and bouncing over grassy plains dotted with clumps of tree covered islands. The artery of water opened up to a few muddy

pools that were filled with hippos and crocodiles, and where a myriad of waders, storks, cranes and eagles actively fed. We followed cheetah patrolling across the plains and watched a lioness and her two cubs playing in the early morning sun. Jackals busy bodied along, and majestic elephants munched on branches plucked from stands of trees, while at intervals across the savannah there were wildebeest, zebra, buffalo, oribi, lechwe and puku. It was a good all round wildlife viewing experience, here in the Zambian equivalent of a cross between the Okavango Delta and the Savuti regions of Botswana.



Our next destination for both safaris is not on the usual tourist route. Chimfunshi, the chimpanzee sanctuary, might not be a destination for the general tourist, but it's a must visit place for the true animal lover - although one needs to be prepared to loose ones heart to the chimps of the sanctuary! The facilities are basic, but you are welcomed into the private home of the Siddle family. It is well worth it to have the chance to physically get involved in interacting with orphaned baby chimpanzees, and playing a small part in improving their lot in the world. No-one leaves without feeling uplifted by their experience



here, and we hope that on leaving our guests can contribute something to support the sanctuary and its work, both for now and for the long term. For the story of the sanctuary please read the book "In My Family Tree" by Sheila Siddle.



Another out of the way destination for those interested in a slice of history is Shiwa House, an English gentleman's manor house and estate in the middle of Africa. The manor house, built in the early part of the last century, is still in the hands of a direct descendant of its creator Sir Stewart Gore-Brown, and so as we were escorted about the vast house and estate we were entertained with tails of yesteryear. On the estate is a natural hot spring that makes for a pleasant way to unwind from the rigors of modern day travel, while the house itself has many interesting nooks and crannies to explore. Wildlife has been reintroduced and palmnut vultures are amongst the

many fantastic birds that inhabit the varied areas of the estate. More details for those interested can be found in the book "Africa House" by Christina Lamb.

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The North and South Luangwa National Parks are the best known of Zambia's wildlife attractions. The northern park is extremely remote and notoriously difficult to access, while the southern park, although still a challenge to reach by road, is well serviced with tourist facilities including an airport. The attraction here is the bush walks and night drives, and on each safari we covered both activities with relish, notching up some excellent wildlife viewing. The morning walks had us leaving one delightfully rustic bush camp and arriving at the next in time for lunch - trying not to be lunch on the way! Yes we did have a close encounter with lions, trod carefully around herds of elephants, and were hurried on by grumpy looking buffalos - but aside from these encounters many more animal sightings were enjoyed along the way. The night drives were full of genet cat, civet cat, hyena, jackal, lion, white tailed mongoose and four toed elephant shrew sightings!



Each of the South Luangwa camps is situated in different habitat, thus giving different experiences at different times of the year (remembering that almost the entire park is closed for many months of the year to vehicles, as the high rainfall and black cotton soil make many areas inaccessible). As a result each camp has its own charm - elephants feeding over the tents and 27 tree frogs taking up residence in the huge outdoor bathroom in one, was not to be outdone by the next having about 300 hippos and 72 crocodiles (a confirmed count) on the doorstep, or honey badgers running about camp in another. The best camp experience was on our last night in Zambia, where a pride of lions with cubs had killed a hippo on the fringes of camp, and we watched as they fed while several hyenas lazed about waiting for their turn. A herd of elephants passing through chased the lions briefly, and we eventually returned to our tents to go to sleep to the sound of lions roaring, cackling hyenas running through camp, and elephants trumpeting in the distance. The result was that on both safaris Luangwa's magical wildlife viewing was experienced by all.



Until next month...



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