

Zambia Authentic Africa

I awakened to a familiar grumbling noise and issued my usual plea: "Rick, please stop snoring." However, my outstretched arm landed not on my sleeping husband, but an empty spot in the bed.

"It's not me. It's the hippos in the river," a voice responded from a moonlit corner of our tent. "They're really making a racket."

I sat up and listened to the chorus of hippos, elephants, and exotic birds echoing in the night. "Holy cow. We really are in Africa."

After months of anticipation, we had just arrived at Chiawa Camp in Zambia's Lower Zambezi National Park. So far, everything had exceeded my expectations. The boat carrying us from the airfield passed dozens of pods of hippos and had slowed to give us a good view of a mother elephant and her offspring. I was also awed by the beauty of the area: »



A Painted African Dog seems unperturbed by passing tourist safari

« a steep escarpment in the distance, red soil down to the water's edge, green trees lining the bank, and low grassy islands stretching lazily in the meandering river.

Elephants swim out to islands in the lower Zambezi river to feast on soft grass

At Chiawa, the staff greeted us on the dock with refreshing beverages and a warm welcome, and I was greatly relieved to see that our "luxury tent" was, in fact, spacious and very comfortable. (www.chiawa.com)

Built on wooden platforms, the six classic tents here include beds with mosquito netting, Egyptian cotton linens, solar-powered lights, a river-view deck, and an open-air bathroom with a flushing loo, a sink, and a shower. The three superior tents are larger, offer more privacy, and come with king beds and fantastic outdoor bathrooms. Ours included two showers — one traditional and another built into a hollowed-out tree — and a claw-foot tub, from which I watched a "bachelor herd" of cape buffalo grazing along the shore.

Days at Chiawa start with a "knock knock" at 5:30. Then everyone gathers around the fire circle for a light breakfast before climbing into open safari vehicles for a game drive or loading up boats for fly-fishing on the Zambezi or heading out on a bush walk in the surrounding area.

We opted for the drive and were rewarded with sightings of wart hogs, baboons, monkeys, elephants, kudus, impalas, bushbucks, and spectacular birds. However, the most memorable sight was the four lions we found devouring an unfortunate cape buffalo. I was surprised and somewhat nervous about how close we were to these powerful cats, but our guide assured me they weren't interested in us.

Lunch, served on a pontoon boat, was followed by an afternoon of canoeing, pre-dinner drinks on the riverbank, and



a candlelit dinner accompanied by an a cappella African chorus. The magical moments of wildlife adventures and gracious hospitality flew by until we suddenly realized it was time to move on to our next destination.

Zambia, often called "the last real Africa," has few areas with tourism infrastructure — and almost nothing on a large scale. From the Lower Zambezi,

we headed north to South Luanga National Park — home to Norman Carr Safaris. In the 1950s, Carr, a devout conservationist, pioneered the concept of walking safaris, for which the South Luanga is now well known. He also built four rustic bush camps in remote locations, which provide guests with authentic and personalized experiences.

(www.normancarsafaris.com)

All beds a Nsolo Can come with mosquito netting



On a before-dinner game drive from Nsolo Camp, our sharp-eyed tracker Kephias spotted an impala that a leopard had hauled up into a tree and two female lions — one of them very obviously pregnant.

The next day Kephias and guide Abraham narrated an on-the-ground view of the bush as we walked to Luwi Camp. From this perspective, I was able to spot a blue-headed agama lizard on the side of a sausage tree and appreciate the beauty of the mahogany trees' seed pods. We came quite close to a dazzle of zebra and stopped for morning tea under a tamarind tree, but the best part of this safari was seeing subtle elements of the bush.

The four bungalows at Luwi are cleverly constructed from yellow thatching grass and timbers lashed together with palm leaves. Large, open-air bathrooms incorporate majestic trees, and split reed mats cover the floor. This lodging was the most basic of our whole trip and also the most memorable for its charming simplicity. The food at Luwi was also our favorite — starting with a lunch buffet that included a great fava

Breakfasts at Chiawa Camp are cooked over an open fire



Luxury tent at Mchenja Camp

bean salad, freshly-baked bread, quiche, and a tasty casserole.

Game highlights at Luwi included the ghoulish glowing yellow eyes of dozens of crocodiles spotted in a lagoon on a night drive and the early morning sight of a pack of painted wild dogs and their pups hunting in a dry river bed. On the way to Mchenja Camp we stopped to

ogle a flock of grey heron and gave wide berth to a large herd of cape buffalo.

Lodging at Mchenja is in five luxury tents set in a beautiful grove of ebony trees next to a river with year-round water. Dinner that night — our last at Norman Carr Safaris — was shared under the stars with a family from England and a Zambian couple. We dined, of course, to a choir of grumbling hippos. — Elizabeth Hansen, photography by

Adams/Hansen Stock Photos



Getting There

We flew South African Airways (SAA) from New York to Johannesburg and connected with one of their flights to Lusaka, Zambia. SAA's flat business class seats, equivalent to most airlines' first class offerings, made it possible to sleep most of the way. I also appreciated the adjustable lumbar support and the chair massage feature that sent rollers up and down my back. My favorites of the several meals were the Chilean sea bass on wasabi mash after leaving JFK and the delicious scrambled eggs after the re-fueling stop in Dakar.