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AFRICA



Canoe trips on the Lower Zambezi River allow close contact with elephants, sometimes in herds up to 100 strong.

Safari in the slow lane

Exploring Zambian park on foot or by canoe offers intimate wildlife encounters

Story and photography by **MARK SISSONS**
 Special Contributor

LOWER ZAMBEZI NATIONAL PARK, Zambia — “Whatever you do, don’t run if we encounter a hostile animal,” warns guide John Pereira.

Valuable advice as we embark on an early morning walking safari in Zambia’s 2,500-square-mile Lower Zambezi National Park.

Our base is Old Mondoro Bush Camp, a cluster of rustic canvas tents set in a grove of acacia trees overlooking the Zambezi River’s maze of hippo- and elephant-inhabited islands and channels.

“Alone, we’re vulnerable,” explains Pereira, a former South African park ranger who manages Old Mondoro with his partner, Lana de Villiers. “But as a group, we look larger and more threatening. So we stay together. And if we must, we fight together,” he says.

I glance at our Zambia Wildlife Authority scout, Reuben, clutching his 375mm hunting rifle, and hope he’s a crack shot.

As my quickening pulse indicates,

Zambia on foot is Africa at its wildest, still undiluted by the mass tourism threatening to overwhelm game reserves in Africa’s Big Three safari destinations: Kenya, Tanzania and South Africa. Zambia, an oft-overlooked southern country and home to some of the continent’s largest game reserves, is emerging as a choice destination among safari connoisseurs.

“Zambia is for the more adventurous traveler, the person who wants a



Seeing Zambia on foot means you avoid the tourist herds.

really authentic bush-camp safari,” says Leora Rothschild, a South Africa-raised safari specialist based in Denver. But well-heeled travelers need not worry about roughing it in the bush, she adds. Camps like Old Mondoro offer the level of high-end accommodation, gourmet cuisine, pampering and other luxury trappings safari snobs have come to expect.

What Zambia doesn’t have are telephoto-toting crowds swarming a snoozing lion. Or afternoon game drives that feel like Land Rover rush hour, as have become common in some East and South African parks. Instead, this comparatively unexplored country offers plenty of opportunities to get out of the vehicle and feel the African soil beneath your feet on a walking safari, a Zambian specialty that many consider the ultimate African bush experience.

This morning I’m certainly walking with a wealth of experience. Pereira and Reuben know the animals, how to read their behavior, and what to look out for.

“In the daytime, man is the main predator, so you are very unlikely to be hunted then,” Pereira says, adding that even the big predators such as lion, cheetah and hyena avoid humans.

“But if you walk around at night, you’re in big trouble,” he adds.

“Leopard tracks,” Reuben whispers, pointing to a distinctive set of paw



Love that shallow water: Hefty hippos travel in pods on the river.

GETAWAY



Baylor University

The Waco Mammoth Site gives public access to prehistoric remains found near Waco in 1978 but kept under wraps.

Tusk task accomplished

The big secret is out: Burial ground for mammoths is open to public

By **SOPHIA DEMBLING**
 Special Contributor

WACO — “Sixty-eight thousand years ago, there was a committed group,” said Waco mayor Virginia DuPuy, speaking before a crowd shivering in a tent on a chilly winter day. “They didn’t choose to commit, but they were the original donors.”

Those first donors were a group of Columbian mammoths that were caught and killed in a mudslide, leaving their bones for posterity.

The remains of this unfortunate herd remained at rest beneath the earth in the Bosque River Basin until 1978, when a couple of guys on a snake hunt came upon them. They took a bone to a paleontologist at Baylor University, thus beginning the process of discovery of the largest known concentration of prehistoric mammoths to have died in a single event — a paleontological site of national, perhaps international, significance.

For the past 31 years, Baylor has closely guarded the location of the Waco Mammoth Site to protect it from poachers and souvenir seekers, though it was only marginally protected from the elements by a tent for all those years. In 1999, after the bones of 25 mammoths had been unearthed, work was suspended until funds could be raised to replace the tent with

something more substantial. When journalists were invited to visit in 2007 as part of the fundraising campaign, they were implored to write about the site but not disclose the location. (All complied.)

But on this day, dignitaries and donors gathered on “what someday might be called the coldest Dec. 5 in 68,000 years,” joked U.S. Rep. Chet Edwards, who was in attendance, to celebrate the opening of the Waco Mammoth Site. With this ribbon-cutting, the bones are accessible to the public for the first time since they were found.

The city, the university and the citizens attending this event (including a group of sixth-graders) together raised \$3.4 million to complete the first phase of the project. The site also now has a small welcome center with gift shop and restrooms, an expensive proposition that required running water and sewer lines to the area. A paved path from the welcome center leads to the new pavilion erected over the dig site.

To your left as you approach is a slope of green where the original 19 creatures were found and removed. Inside the asymmetrical pitch-roofed pavilion (reminiscent of that old tent) the bones are well protected and displayed in a jewel-box setting.

Viewing the dig from a raised walkway, you’ll first encounter a bull mammoth

See **MAMMOTH** Page 4K



ROD AYLLOTTE/Waco Tribune-Herald

Anita Benedict of Baylor University’s Mayborn Museum talked about the bones at the Dec. 5 unveiling.

Down and dirty on an African safari

Continued from Page 1K

Continued in the dried creek bed we're traversing. They may belong to the pair of feline lovers we encountered mating last night during a nocturnal game drive.

Soon after heading through the woodland to follow the cat tracks, we're caught in a primal triangulation. To one side of us, a grunting hippo surfaces like a submarine in the algae-covered water and waddles up the bank to graze. On the other, members of a herd of male Cape buffalo nervously fixate on us. And right in front, a huge male adolescent elephant, alerted to our presence, trumpets loudly and aggressively flaps his enormous ears, which legend says God made in the shape of Africa.

"We've entered his personal space, and he wants to appear as big and impressive as possible," Pereira says, motioning us to crouch behind a termite mound and remain still, not giving the elephant a reason to charge us.

As we watch nervously, the largest land animal on Earth decides instead to give us a wide berth and join the rest of his herd splashing in the cool Zambezi waters.

"It's all about how much confidence the animal has," Pereira says. "He's thinking that because I'm an elephant, everybody runs. But they aren't running. That's odd. So I better back off."

And if we had run? Pereira says the elephant might have charged us. As would the hippo if we had found our-

selves between it and the water, the only place where it feels secure. And most certainly the buffaloes, which kill more humans than any other animal on this continent, had they perceived us as a threat. In the African bush, it's all about respecting escape routes.

What if there is no escape? I find out that afternoon when a herd of 40 bull elephants fords the Zambezi and climbs up the riverbank into Old Mondoro. Pulse racing, I retreat inside my open-sided tent as a group of these gentle giants shakes the massive winterthorn trees just outside, snacking on the protein-packed pods that fall to the ground. We're so close I can nearly tickle one of their trunks—a potentially fatal gesture, because any sudden movement could startle my visitors and trigger jumbo-size trouble.

The elephants have been feeding here since long before the camp was built. These intelligent creatures operate on a strict schedule, and there are certain areas where they want to be during certain parts of the day, regardless of who else is around. And of course, being pachyderms, they never forget the route.

"At first I was terrified. But then I thought, this is the most wonderful experience of my life," recalls Glenda Law, who is staying at Old Mondoro with her husband, Alf, a lawyer from New York. "Alf had fallen asleep and was snoring loudly," she adds. "The young bull elephants heard this and,

perhaps thinking it was some kind of mating call, came closer to see what it was."

Over a torch-lit riverside dinner that evening, De Villiers explains that the camp has never had a problem with animals entering or damaging the tents. Reassured, I'm more relaxed the next afternoon when the young elephant hovering up foliage just yards from my porch pauses to stare at me with its long-lashed eyes. Instead of fear, I feel more of an anthropomorphic cross-species connection. What I wouldn't give to read its mind.

Intensity of wildlife encounters aside, it's the high animal-to-human ratio that makes Lower Zambezi National Park so unusual, according to Grant Cummings, whose family owns both Old Mondoro and nearby Chiawa, voted one of Africa's top luxury camps by *Condé Nast Traveler*.

"Anywhere else in Africa, you would have 20-30 camps situated in this sort of pristine environment," Cummings says over gin and tonic in the shade of evergreen mahogany trees.

"Here, just six camps share 75 miles of Lower Zambezi River frontage," he adds. "Because the animals are caught between the mountains and the river, they're forced to migrate to this nutrient-rich floodplain when everything dries up, making for superb game viewing."

The Zambezi also offers outstanding game and bird viewing, which I learn the next afternoon during a canoe safari with Chiawa's head guide, Paul Gobbler. As we leisurely navigate labyrinths of ever-shifting shallow channels, elephants graze on nearby islands, surrounded by pods of snorting hippos packing 3-foot-long incisors that can slice a person in half. African fish eagles and flocks of red-winged pratincole circle high overhead.

Beneath the calm waters of this 1,633-mile-long waterway dividing Zambia and Zimbabwe—19th-century explorer David Livingstone called it "God's highway"—lurk opportunistic crocodiles waiting for crested guinea fowl or Egyptian geese to wander too close



Photos by MARK SISSONS/Special Contributor

Old Mondoro camp provides rustic yet comfortable lodging.

When you go

Getting there

South African Airways (www.flysaa.com) flies daily to Johannesburg from New York, with connections to Zambia's capital of Lusaka, which is near Lower Zambezi National Park. Visitors with next-day safari connections can stay at Chaminuka Luxury Lodge and nature reserve (www.chaminuka.com), 20 minutes from the airport.

Outfitters

■ Denver-based Rothschild Safaris (1-800-405-9463; www.rothschildsafaris.com) offers a range of customizable Zambia itineraries, some featuring Chiawa (www.chiawa.com) and Old Mondoro (www.chiawa.com/pages/old_mondoro_bush_camp.htm) bush camps. They also offer extensions to Victoria Falls (www.zambia-tourism.com/travel/places/victoria.htm), where you can take a dip in the Devil's Pool, a naturally formed retaining wall that allows you to swim right up to the lip of the frothing gorge without plunging to your death. Ten-day Zambia safaris start at \$4,500, not including international air.

■ Other U.S.-based safari outfitters offering Zambia itineraries include Global Adrenaline (www.globaladrenaline.com), the Wild Source (<http://thewildsource.com>) and Africa Adventure Consultants (www.adventuresinafrica.com).

■ Recommended Zambia-based operators that offer walking safaris include Luangwa Valley-based Kafunta Safaris (www.luangwa.com) and Nanzhila Plains Safari Camp (www.nanzhila.com) in remote Kafue National Park, Africa's second-largest game reserve.

Resource

Zambia Tourism Board, www.zambiatourism.com

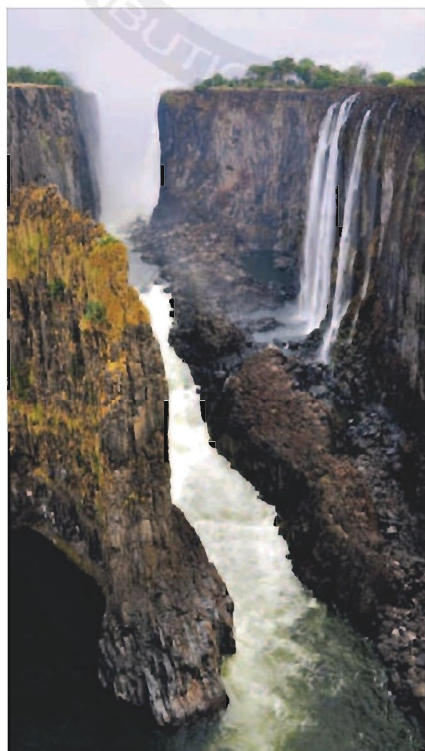
to the water's edge. That makes it all the more exciting when we get caught between crocs and a hard place, stuck on a sandbar in the middle of the river.

"We've got crocs and hippos all around us," Gobbler says, betraying no hint of alarm. "But that's OK. We'll just hop out here and drag our little craft across this stretch of sand. Our mission now is to get back to dry land, limbs intact."

A half-dozen massive rep-

tiles watch as we climb out of our canoe, pull it across the sandbar to open water, then paddle for shore, where sun-downers await. Never has a chilled glass of chardonnay tasted so good as we toast another human-powered adventure in Zambia, where going on safari means not being afraid to get your boots dirty and your feet wet.

Mark Sissons is a freelance writer in Canada.



Known as **Mosi-oa-Tunya** — the smoke that thunders — to the local Kololo tribe, Victoria Falls is one of the seven natural wonders of the world.



Staff graphic