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Zambia underfoot: On the ground at Zebra Plains

By Anne Z. Cooke
McClatchy-Tribune News Service

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MFUWE, Zambia — We're nodding off in our tent, pitched under a tree, when the crunching and gnashing begin.

It's the hippos again, a half-dozen massive beasts climbing up from the Luangwa River for their nightly feed. During September, a hot, dry month here at Zebra Plains Camp, in northeast Zambia, the tree's foot-long fruit hang low, an irresistible meal for diners with gaping jaws and fist-size grinders.

Silence falls as the hippos lumber away. For a moment we doze — well wined and dined after a long day tramping through the bush, tracking wild game. Then the bushes rustle and the elephants arrive, treading gently to avoid our plastic ground cloth and canvas patio chairs. Amazed at how quietly those huge feet step, we peer out through our screened windows, spotting a shifting shadow reaching for the top branches.

I fall asleep wondering who decided to pitch the tent under a sausage tree. Intentional, perhaps, or a prank, to give the dudes a thrill? But Garth Hovell, manager at Zebra Plains, a walking safari camp in the most remote sector of the South Luangwa National Park, shakes his head. "No way," he says. With 20 years' of bush experience, Hovell, head naturalist for Sanctuary Retreats' five Zambian lodges, says that here in the bush, where we're the intruders, safety is Rule One. No blood allowed on his watch, is what I'm thinking.

"If it gets much hotter you'll thank the tree for such big branches," says Milemia Banda, guide and second-in-command, with a twinkle. "And anyway, the animals are more afraid of you than you are of them. With no roads, no vehicles and no airplanes in this sector, they rarely see or hear people. To them a tent is like a tree, something to walk around."

The Luangwa River, pristine and undammed, is the reason we — and the wildlife — are here at Zebra Plains, near the national park's northern border. Flowing in wide, curving loops over fertile plains and through wild miombo woodland, the Luangwa supports an immense diversity of species, a veritable Zambian Ark.

From elephants to antelope, lions to leopards and crocodiles to hippos, all flourish within this vast wildlife refuge. "Living with them, you really feel close to the animals," says Hovell. "And you'll see them, once you know where to look."

During the dry season, August through mid-October, inland waterholes dry up, pushing wildlife toward the river. It also brings them closer to our camp and to the sausage trees.

Like them, your feet will be the only transport available during your stay at Zebra Plains, a reminder that hiking boots are in order. Except for the three-hour drive from the Mfuwe airport — and the return when you leave — walking will take you across the plains, along the river bank and to the campfire for appetizers and a sundowner. "The road ends here so we have to walk the last bit, less than a quarter mile," Hovell announced when we first arrived. "I want you to see the river and the camp on foot. You need to experience it the way the early explorers did."

Digesting that unwelcome news (jet lag is a buzz kill) we managed smiles for the three camp staff who hoisted our heavy suitcases up onto their heads and fell into line. Tramping along after Hovell, we must have looked the very image of Henry Stanley, searching for David Livingstone, the missionary, in 1869, weary reporter in rumpled khakis trailed by a long line of perspiring porters.

Walking-only safari camps, like Zebra Plains, are probably this decade's biggest news in African safaris — and ironically, the oldest. The first Europeans to venture deep into the Dark Continent — glory-seeking adventurers, greedy miners and relentless missionaries — expected to walk. Even after trucks and jeeps arrived, hunters and photographers bunked in tents, stalked their quarry on foot and thrilled to the charge of angry lions.

The first guest-organized walking camp was founded south of Zebra Plains in 1961 by Norman Carr, a former ranger and lifelong environmentalist. Since then, hard-core walking camps have become Zambia's signature.

Most safari lodges are commercial enterprises, of course, relying on a half-dozen off-road vehicles and guides who radio big animal sightings from guide to guide. Guests get what they've paid for: guaranteed close-ups of lions yawning and trumpeting elephants. Luxury is the norm as is a large staff, mostly local people, from manager, rangers and guides to the chef, dish washers, maids, laundresses and the fix-it crew.

"That's not Zebra Plains," said Hovell. "We're designed for people who've been on safari before



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but are tired of sitting in a vehicle. Curious people who want to get away from exhaust fumes and down on the ground. They want to hear dry grass crackle underfoot and smell the earth," he said, as we gathered in the Mess Tent for a first-day orientation. In the days ahead, he promised, we'd track sign (footprints and spoor), be alert for unexpected encounter, and "see the animals the way they really are in nature."

As in all game lodges, our days began at 6 a.m. while the air was cool and the animals active. On day one we headed for a distant loop of the Chibembe River, led by Mathews, the camp's armed guard, rifle loaded and at the ready. Hovell followed toting binoculars and a day pack with a first aid kit, loaner hats, survival gear, extra water and sun lotion.

We six, dressed in khakis (tan makes the best camouflage), fell in behind. Guide Rabson Banda walking shotgun, kept us bunched up tight. Predators like to pick on stragglers, he told us with a grin. Banda's backpack overflowed with the tea things: a portable gas stove, pot, cups, tea bags, cookies, brownies and water.

Here and there groups of tiny puku grazed calmly, lifting their heads to watch us pass. Three giraffe and sable antelope were more wary, moving into a grove of mopane trees. After an hour walking, stopping to identify plants and tell-tale spoor, Mathews and Hovell pulled up short and bent over to inspect a lion track. With a zing of fear, we stood still and peered left and right until Hovell spied two lionesses at 50 yards, half hidden in deep grass. For a long minute they stared at us, unmoving, and then they were gone, fleeing the other way.

Each day followed a similar pattern. Morning game drives lasted from 6-11 a.m. followed by lunch and down time for a shower, journal notations or photo downloads. From 4-6 p.m. we set out again, now searching for the elephant family approaching the river, or to watch the hippos grunt and growl, jockeying for position.

At twilight we gathered around the campfire for a glass of wine, some surprisingly appealing dishes and an evening of stories and stars. Escorted back to our tent by a game-wise guide with a flashlight (sometimes Isaac our porter and guard, and sometimes Milemia or Rabson) — we took a warm shower, crawled under the mosquito netting onto a first-class mattress and fell asleep to the hippo chorus.

Because walking safaris are specialized, choosing an itinerary that includes stays at other lodges is a good way to broaden your experience. Sanctuary Retreats has five Zambian lodges, each different from the others. Driving safaris are most popular, but several lodges lead guided walks as well. Having done both, I confess that I like the convenience, comfort and range that a vehicle provides. But if you're like me, you won't say you've really seen Zambia until you've walked the walk.

IF YOU GO:

Zebra Plains is open from June through Oct. 31 only; for more see www.sanctuaryretreats.com. The all-inclusive rate per person per night, sharing a tent, is \$585. Sanctuary's other Zambian lodges include Chichele Presidential Lodge and Puku Ridge, near Mfuwe; Sussi & Chuma in Livingstone; and Zambezi Kalefu Camp, near Lusaka.

OTHER BOOKING OPTIONS: Most game lodge companies will book their clients into any Zambian or South African lodge, regardless of who owns or manages it. If you find something you can't miss, your booking agent should be able to add it to your tour. It's routine.

GETTING THERE: We prefer South African Airways, flying nonstop to Johannesburg, South Africa, from New York's JFK Airport or from Washington, D.C. Dulles International Airport.

SAA's connecting flights continue north to Livingstone (on Zambia's southern border); another flight continues to Lusaka, Zambia's capital city; and the last goes on to Mfuwe, south of Zebra Plains. Pack a bag of snacks and a thick paperback novel and you'll be ready for the trek. The last leg, a three-hour drive into camp, isn't just transportation. It's a game drive in itself, with views of wildlife, native villages and giant baobab trees.

RECOMMENDED GUIDES: Only one Zambia guidebook is worth the time you'll spend reading and rereading it: "Zambia: The Bradt Travel Guide," by Chris McIntyre, \$28.99, distributed in the U.S. by Globe Pequot Press.

McIntyre, a long-time Africa traveler and writer, pulls out the stops to deliver a work that abounds in wildlife description, environmental and political issues, social history, tribal groups, language differences, best lodges and hotels, town sights, early and recent history, reading lists, anecdotes, tips, maps and distances.

He informs in a conversational tone and entertains with personal comments and understated humor. The book sports 58 glossy photos of places, people, animals and birds, and this when most guidebook publishers no longer spend on illustrations.

The second Bradt Guidebook, "Zambia & Malawi," \$26.99, is authored by a group of writers. This book is a good choice if your trip is short and you're visiting both countries. The book reflects Bradt's focus on quality, and provides solid information, superior maps and color photos.

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