

SUNDAY

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TRAVEL

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Expert trackers Lazarus and Louis find gold: a pride of lions sleeping off dinner at Earth Camp Lodge, Sabi Sabi Private Game Reserve, South Africa.

Animals roam free, guests cage up, at these resorts

MUFEWE, Zambia — Alex Stewart, waiting on the steps of Billungwe Lodge, deep in the Zambian bush, likes nothing better than surprising first-time visitors to this wilderness outpost with an introduction to the next-door neighbors.

"Come in, come in, you're just in time," she says, a twinkle in her eyes, leading me to the rear deck of the lodge, one of six Bushcamp Company lodges in the South Luangwa National Park. When she points to the backyard waterhole, I get it.

There they are, two female elephants and a baby, splashing each other, cooling off in this hot October day.

"Junior is a year-old now," says Stewart, beaming as the little gurgly rolls over and over in a bathtub-shaped hole, snacking the water with his trunk and feet, the very image of a 4-year-old left loose in a wilding pool.

"And that's Harry," adds Stewart, as a hefty hippopotamus rises up in the water, blinks at the commotion and sinks back down. "He walks over from the Luangwa River to get away from the other males," she says, tossing back her hair, a thick white mane. "He likes it here, where he's top dog."

After 26 hours and three flights from California to Zambia, in southern Africa, with a three-hour drive from Bushcamp's Mfuwe Lodge to Billungwe, I was dragging. But not for long.

I'd forgotten how it feels on your first day in the bush. Exhilarated and wide-eyed. Over the moon. And then, sobering up, eager but cautious. A safari lodge is a thousand times better than any zoo, but you — not the animals — are the ones



Assuming the yoga position, the "waterhole bend," this giraffe gets a drink at Billungwe, Bushcamp Company, Mfuwe, Zambia.



Size matters when two forces meet. Flapping ears tell us to back off and give him space at the South Luangwa National Park, Bushcamp Company, Mfuwe, Zambia.

Avoiding crowds crucial to cruise ship success

I've spent the last several decades exploring Europe from every conceivable angle. And this includes checking out Europe the way millions of people do — from a cruise ship.

I'm not out to promote or put down cruising. For some people, it's a great choice, and for others, it's not. On the plus side, cruising can be economical, with transportation, room, and meals all included in one price. It can be ideal for those who want their vacation logistics taken care of. And toggling from a floating resort to exciting days on shore — nearly each day in a different country — can be efficient if you want to sample a range of places in a short time.

Cruise ships offer plenty of on-board fun, but to me, the destinations are the reason to set sail. The trick is deciding how to best experience them. Many would say cruising can insulate you from the "real Europe." You're going to the most famous places and seeing them at the same time as thousands



Smart cruisers stop at the local tourist information booth, like this one in Livorno, to get unbiased information for do-it-yourself time in port.

Zambia



Billungwe manager Alex Stewart has a backdrop for her guests: the evening sundowner in the Luangwa River with the Chinden Hills in the background.

The nitty gritty

PLANNING: There are no African safaris that you can't afford. Tent camping and 35-person tours, favored by students and young couples, are cheap and fun. High-priced lodges cost more because they offer more, from personal airport transfers to private cabins, comfortable beds, meals, beverages, game drives, offsite tours and even laundry service.

GETTING THERE: For South African Airways' routes, flight times and special offers see flyana.com. Vias to enter Zambia are sold at the Lusaka Airport; the \$50 visa is slightly more expensive but provides multiple entries.

STAYING: See the Bushcamp Company at bushcampcompany.com, the Sabi Sabi Bush Lodge at sabisabi.com, and the Islands of Sankaba at islandsankaba.net. These and similar safari lodge websites provide photos, maps and descriptions of lodgings, meals, wildlife, game drives and climate. All-inclusive safari lodge rates per person, per night, range from \$570 to \$1,000 or more.

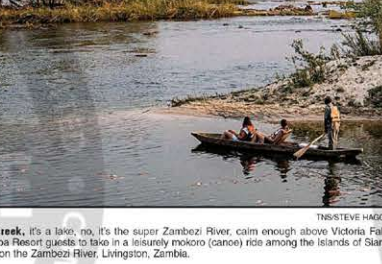
IN FROM THE TREES: In the foreground to Zimabwe, the forest is the foreground to Zambia, in southern Africa, with a three-hour drive from Bushcamp's Mfuwe Lodge to Billungwe, I was dragging. But not for long.

Sleeping late we relaxed, swam in the pool, took a sunset cruise, joined an off-island picnic and got into a mokoro (canoe) for a guided ride, launched from the dock. Dinner times were especially busy, the restaurant has a local following.

With Mosei-co-Lunya National Park next door, game drives were up to available. Day we passed them up to spend a day with a young, college-educated Zambian couple, Bill and Susan (not their real names).

Comparing cultures, we played "straight man-funny man," trading jests about housing prices, the cost of gas, favorite vegetables, names for babies, strange wedding ceremonies and the number of cows in the herd. Bush Camp, a family-friendly resort, both in the Sabi Sabi Private Game Reserve.

Despite a day lost to rain, we didn't miss a drive, bouncing over the hills in comfortable vehicles, with rain gear on board and miles of new territory to explore. When our guide and tracker, Lazarus Mahore and



It's a creek, it's a lake, no, it's the super Zambezi River, calm enough above Victoria Falls for Sankaba Resort guests to take in a leisurely mokoro (canoe) ride among the islands of Sankaba resort, on the Zambezi River, Livingston, Zambia.



The Bushcamp Company's Chamilandu Lodge staff brings out the welcome mat. Doc carries the fruit drinks.

Louis Mikamsi, spotted paw prints in the dirt, they dove over every bush until they found the lions, asleep in the grass.

But the lodges themselves couldn't have been more different. Challenging the Neanderthals, Earth Lodge's 13 luxury suites were caves, richly decorated dugouts in the side of a hill, invisible from the top or sides. We sat in our plunge pool outside the front windows and watched the impala graze in complete privacy.

The lodges, tidy rock gardens, weathered tree trunks, bar, wine cellar and dining room echoed the motif, fresh and inviting but Spartan. Even the dinner guests fit the mold, eating at the next table, alone and in silence.

In contrast, Bush Camp, with 25 luxury suites, popped with energy. Game drives mattered, but as part of the larger experience. The high school kids in short-shorts, celebrating a birthday, said it best: "First person to see a rhino gets the prize."

The food, served buffet style on a half-dozen tables heaped high, ran from meats, fish and breads to salads, fruit, vegetables, pasta and cookies, while the guests, sipping wherever there was space, mingled and exchanged names.

You could leave your kids in the Children's Center, soar in the Huntingdon Village or visit two nearby schools, both supported by the game lodges. Or you could meet village elder Nsokele Sabiyu, a Sankaba shaman. I sat down, crossed my legs, she rolled the knucklebones and then she spoke. The words I'd hoped to hear: "We will meet again sometime."

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ened nightlight, I felt right at home. But the lodges weren't identical.

Billungwe looked over a waterhole; Chamilandu had a river view and a "hide" above an elephant path. Chamilandu's dinners were served by the water, and a "hide" above the Mahogany tree and the discovery — to our mutual astonishment — that our fellow guests, a couple from England, live next door to my English cousin.

Manda Chisanga, our guide, the award-winning naturalist and a keen-eyed tracker, was both tireless and professional. "Did you hear that?" he asked. "It's an eagle owl. He's on that tree branch, there, no, to the left. And over there, the grass is moving but there's no wind to-night. Do you see the leopard?"

We bonded when I told him I drove a 48-year-old car with a dented fender, and a disbeliever, he cracked a smile then broke down laughing. "No, you don't really do you! That's too funny," he said, shaking his head, chortling just as we spotted a pair of hyenas.

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