

TRAVEL & ARTS



OFF THE GRID

Sixteen days, five game-lodge destinations and none of them alike

BY ANNE Z. COOKE
Tribune News Service

MFUWE, Zambia — Alex Stewart, waiting on the steps of Bilimungwe 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 urges, a twinkle in her eye, 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 on this hot October day.

"Junior is a year old now," says Stewart, beaming as the little guy rolls over and over in a bathtub-shaped hole, smacking the water with his trunk and feet.

"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 Bilimungwe, 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 in the cage.

"You need to be aware, to look around you and, especially, never go out at night without an escort," says Bushcamp manager Amy Alderman.

The safe way to watch lions is from an off-road vehicle, which the big cats ignore. When your tracker climbs up on the fender and your guide shifts gears, the adventure



STEVE HAGGERTY/TNS PHOTOS

Top: The Zambezi River is calm enough above Victoria Falls for Islands of Siankaba lodge guests to take a canoe ride. Above: Assuming the yoga position, the "waterhole bend" this giraffe gets a drink at Bilimungwe in Zambia.

begins: a search for lions, leopards, elephants, rhinos, hippos, buffalo, hyenas, zebras, impalas, giraffes, wildebeests, rhinos, crocodiles and more.

Our plan called for flying to Johannesburg, then north to Lusaka and Mfuwe, transfer to Mfuwe Lodge, then to Bilimungwe and later to

Chamilandu. Next, fly south to Livingston for a couple of days at the Islands of Si-ankaba, the riverside resort in the Zambezi River. Finally, a flight to Skukuza, in South Africa, for a visit to Earth Lodge and Bush Lodge, in the 160,000-acre Sabi Sabi Private Game Reserve, on the border of Kruger National Park.

Sixteen days, five game-lodge destinations and none of them alike.

There are no African safaris 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 laundry service. All-inclusive safari lodge rates per person, per night, range from about \$570 to \$1,000 or more.

I picked Bilimungwe and Chamilandu for the location, in the wilderness and off the grid. With rustic cabins, six to eight guests, friendly staff, first-class guides and a dedication to wildlife preservation, they sounded perfect.

Built of logs, planks, reeds and thatching, the cabins were a work of art. And with striped pillows, African colors, flush toilet, running water, screens and a single solar-powered nightlight, I felt right

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ZAMBIA

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at home. But the lodges weren't identical.

Bilimungwe looked over a waterhole; Chamilandu had a river view and a "hide" above an elephant path. Chamilandu's diners were served by the river; at Bilimungwe we ate on the deck by candlelight, sharing wine and hashing over the day's surprises, such as the lions that killed and ate the buffalo and the discovery — to our mutual astonishment — that our fellow guests, a couple from England, live next door to my English cousins.

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 tonight. Do you see the leopard?"

Steve picked the next destination, the Islands of Siankaba lodge built on two private islands in the mighty Zambezi, where the river is wide and shallow. Spectacular views from the lodge take it all in, from the trees in the foreground to Zimbabwe, on the river's far side.

The patio, with tables and chairs, flower beds and a fountain, was the gathering place. Our bedroom, one of seven tented cabins connected by swinging bridges, clung to the bank above the high-water mark.

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.



STEVE HAGGERTY/TNS

Bilimungwe Lodge in Zambia is crafted out of logs, planks, reeds and thatch.

We spent our last week in South Africa at two very different safari lodges, the starkly minimalist Earth Lodge and its partner, 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 game 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 Louis Mkamsi, spotted paw

prints in the dirt, they drove over every bush until they found the lions, asleep

in the grass.

But the lodges themselves couldn't have been more different. Channeling 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 lounges, 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 food, served buffet style on a half-dozen tables heaped high, ran from meats, fish and pasta to salads, fruit, vegetables, breads and cookies, while the guests, sitting wherever there was space, mingled and exchanged names.

You could tour nearby Huntington Village or visit two local schools, both

supported by the game lodges. Or you could meet a Shangaan shaman, who invited me into her rondavel, where I sat down and crossed my legs. This village elder rolled the knucklebones and then spoke the words I'd hoped to hear: "We will meet again sometime."

Anne Z. Cooke is a freelance writer.

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