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STAR METRO VANCOUVER 13

DAILY LIFE

TRAVEL

Be one with wildlife at Zambia's exquisite safari lodges

Get an up close look at lions, leopards, elephants, hippos, buffalo, rhinos and more

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 neighbours.

"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 water hole, 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, the very image of a 4-year-old let loose in a wading 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



Expert trackers Lazarus and Louis find gold: a pride of lions sleeping off dinner. Flapping ears tells us to back off and give this guy space at the South Luangwa National Park. TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE PHOTOS

males," she says. "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.

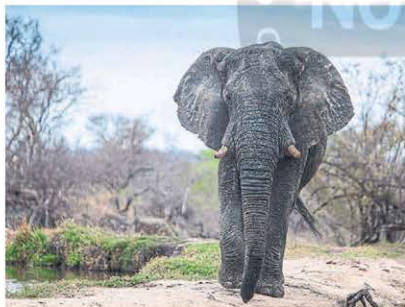
I'd forgotten how it feels on your first day in the bush. Excited and wide-eyed. Over the moon. And then, sobering up, eager but cautious. A safari lodge is a thousand times better than any zoo, but are you — not the animals — are the ones in the cage.

"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 begins, a search for the legendary "Big Five," (lions, leopards, elephants, hippos and buffalo); and the "Lesser Eleven": hyenas, zebras, impalas, bushbucks, giraffe, wildebeest, rhinos, wild dogs, crocodiles, civets and genets.

Why this trip, our fourth to the region? Steve, my husband, showed me a South African Airways ticket sale online, and I said it was too good



to pass up. And we had a plan. Fly from Washington, D.C., 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 Siankaba, 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-logic destinations, and none of them alike.

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 colours, flush toilet, running water, screens and a single solar-powered night light, I felt right at home. But the lodges weren't identical.

Bilimungwe looked over a water hole; Chamilandu had a river view and a "hide" above an elephant path. Chamilandu's dinners were

served by the river; at Bilimungwe we ate on the deck by candlelight, sharing wine and hashing over the day's surprises.

Steve picked the next destination, the Islands of Siankaba, on an island 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. Dinner times were especially busy; the restaurant has a local following.

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 drive, bouncing over the hills in comfortable vehicles, with rain gear on board and miles of new territory to explore.