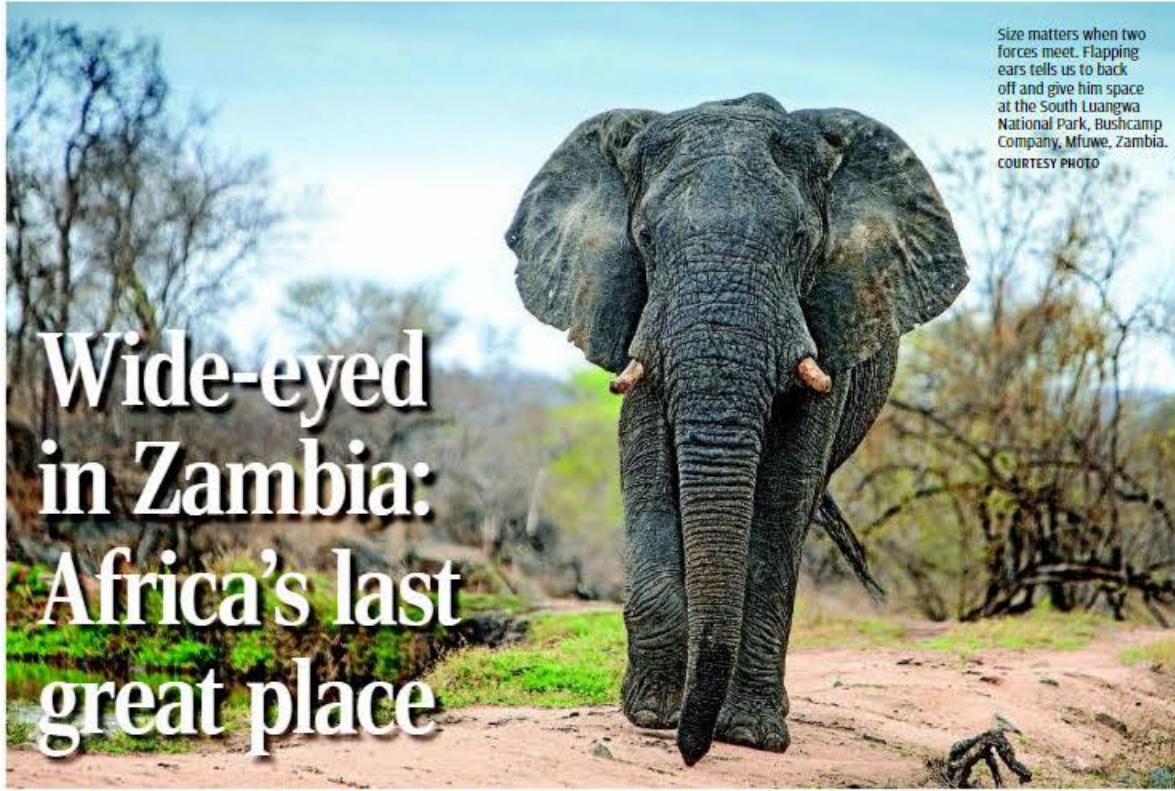


The good life

Sunday, September 29, 2019
THE COURIER

Off the grid Zambia, Africa's last great destination



Wide-eyed in Zambia: Africa's last great place

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, 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, blinking 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 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-lodge destinations, and none of them alike.

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

Zambia

From 2
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 night-light, I felt right 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 dinners were served by the river; at Bilimungwe we ate on the deck by candlelight, sharing wine and hashing over the day's surprises. The lions that killed and ate

the buffalo, the bush babies in the Mahogany tree 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, 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. 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



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

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"We will meet again some time."

Nosiya Sabiya, a Shangaan shaman and village elder

Zambia

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 leave your kids in the Children's Center, tour Huntington Village or visit two nearby schools, both supported by the game lodges. Or you could meet village elder Nosiya Sabiya, a Shangaan shaman. Invited into her rondavel, 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 some time."

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 www.flysaa.com. Visas 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 www.bushcampcompany.com; the Sabi Sabi Bush Lodge at www.sabisabi.com; and the Islands of Siankaba at www.siankaba.net. These and similar safari lodge websites provide photos, maps and descriptions of lodging, meals, wildlife, game drives and climate. All-inclusive safari lodge rates per person, per night, range from \$570 to \$1,000 or more.



Bilimungwe Lodge, more rustic comfort home-made in Africa, crafted out of logs, planks, reeds and thatch. Bushcamp Company game lodges, Mfuwe, Zambia. COURTESY PHOTOS



Those we love don't go away. They walk beside us every day. Unseen, unheard, but always near. Still loved, still missed and very dear.

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