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A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

The Luangwa Valley National Park in northern Zambia boasts the largest concentration of elephants in Africa, and is one of the few remaining areas which has a viable population of black rhinoceros. It is also one of only a handful of African national parks where you are allowed to explore on foot.

David Higgs describes his experiences during a five-day walking safari based at Chibembe Lodge in South Luangwa National Park.

Ten metres away, a pair of eyes the size of tennis balls were peering at me just above the level of the brown swirling water. I was thousands of miles from home, crossing the Luangwa River in a small boat, my life in the hands of a young Nyanja tribesman who was now manoeuvring us around the territory of this huge hippo.

The creature raised its enormous, box-like head exposing a pink, cavernous mouth spiked with four massive crescents of ivory and let out a noise which sounded like the dirtiest laugh I had ever heard. Was the source of amusement my newly acquired safari gear or the boat's paddle (a plastic toilet seat lid attached to a piece of wood)? We didn't wait to find out.

When we reached the far side of the river, our game guard and trail leader led our party of seven up on to the top of the river bank by way of a well-used 'hippo run'. We began to walk in single file behind the trail leader, all of us hushed into silence in awe of our first experience of the African bush. The trail led through a thick copse of trees by the river's edge. As we rounded a clump of bushes, our guide signalled to us to stand still. Just in front, a female elephant and calf were feeding on the fallen fruit of a mchenja tree. The presence of one elephant indicated that there might be others close by.

While we scrutinised our surrounds for lurking grey forms we could hear a woodpecker somewhere above hammering a tattoo on a tree branch. In the meantime, the wind had shifted and the cow raised her trunk and swivelled it like a grey, nasal periscope, probing the air for our scent. The trail leader kicked at the ground and watched the fine dust drift with the breeze. We moved quietly away and shortly afterwards saw the grey trunk arch down again and resume delicately picking up the small, marble-sized fruits.

It was unsettling to feel so vulnerable in an environment where all the inhabitants were aware of the pattern of changing odours, a sense with which humans are so poorly endowed. One smell which we quickly learned to identify, however, was the stench of decaying flesh. No smell I know has the same sickly sweetness which clings to the lining of your nose. Our game guard soon tracked down the source — it was my first lion, or more accurately, my first half lion.

As we emerged into a small clearing in the



A young male elephant hangs around Chikoko Camp, probably attracted by the fruits of the Camp's large mchenja tree. If his dinner coincides with yours, he always has priority

tall elephant grass, a number of maribou storks rose ponderously into the air with stiffly beating wings, weighed down by their distended crops. In front of us were the remains of a mature lioness. The neck and head were severely bruised as though she had been crushed by a huge weight. A short distance away we saw an elephant calf closely escorted by its mother. The calf had fresh scratches on its head and shoulders. It was clear that the lion had attempted to kill the calf but had unwisely chosen a moment when the cow was too near. The consequences of poor judgement could obviously be as severe for the predator as the prey.

We walked on, following the path of a dry stream bed. Ahead of us a small troop of baboons who had been feeding on the ground beat a hasty retreat, galloping on all fours across to the nearest trees, leaving a vapour trail of dust which wafted away in their wake. It was now 9.30 am, two hours after we had first crossed the river. Nearby, at the edge of a small lagoon, we could see a tamarind tree growing out of a large mound which had once been a termite hill — an ideal vantage point from which to watch the hippos jostling in the muddy water. The tea boy, who had been

walking quietly at the rear of the party, now began to build a fire. The box which he had been carrying on his head contained mugs, tea, coffee and a kettle. It seemed quite incongruous, minutes later, to be sitting on a termite hill in the middle of Africa sipping tea and eating biscuits.

The Luangwa Valley is famous for its bird life. Until very recently, it held the world record for the number of species spotted in a 24-hour period. We sat totally absorbed watching the lily trotters stalking over the thick green carpet of water lettuce on their outsize feet. Every so often, one of them would pause to tug at a leaf and scabble to catch the small worms and grubs which were revealed underneath.

A fish eagle high in a tree on the far bank threw back its head and screeched. Yellow-

Right above: the elephant population numbers about 50,000. We observed these two females escorting a youngster across the River near Chipembe Camp; the herd of hippo appeared unconcerned. **Below:** at least 2,000 black rhino live in the Park. This female and calf were on the outskirts of Mutunda Plain, a good area for spotting rhino





David Higgs



WIN A WALKING SAFARI HOLIDAY FOR TWO IN THE LUANGWA VALLEY SEE PAGE 85

billed storks prowled purposefully in the shallows, apparently ignoring the crocodiles which drifted nearby. A pied kingfisher hovered three metres above the river, then folded its wings and plunged into the water to emerge with a small barbell fish clamped in its beak.

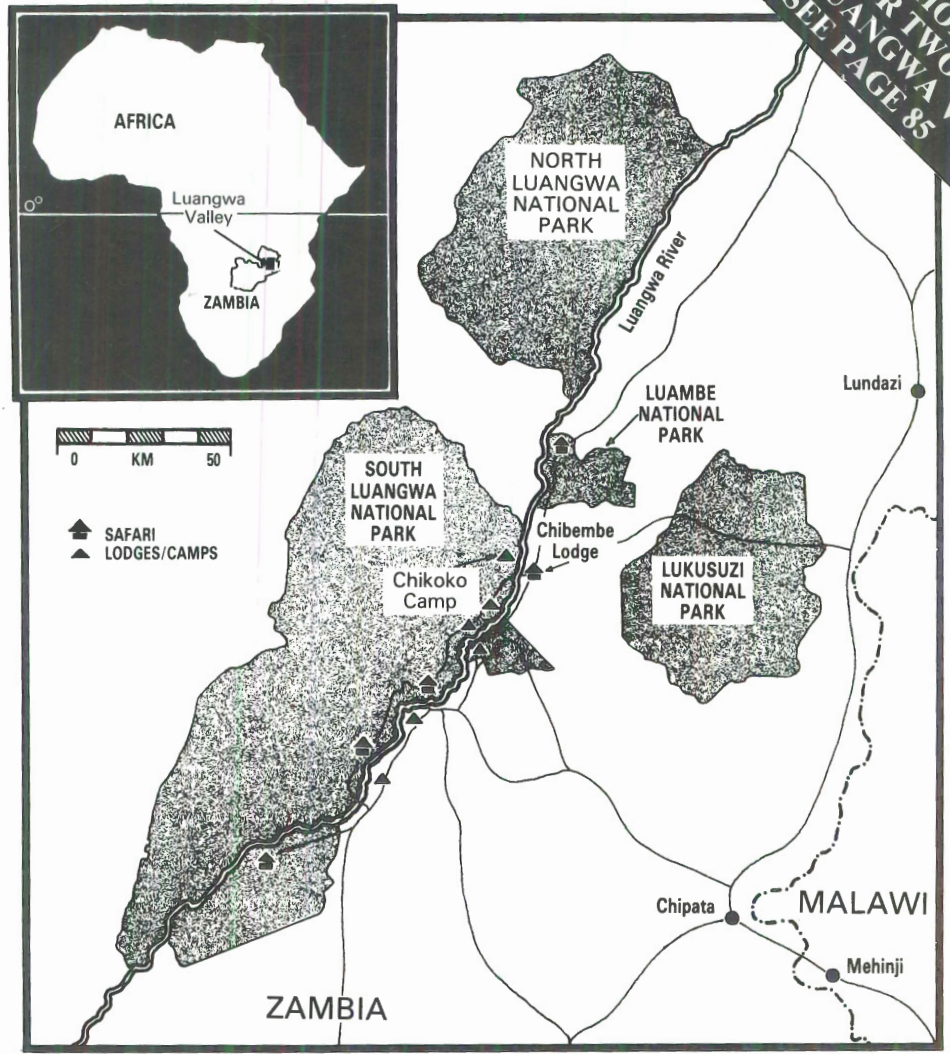
We rested for half an hour and in that time counted some 20 different species of bird. The sun was now quite high and in the distance we could see herds of puku, impala and zebra shimmering in the heat. We walked on at a leisurely pace, crossed a small stream conveniently spanned by a fallen tree and soon reached the first of the four bush camps. Five grass huts with beds were grouped in a semi-circle the river's edge. A short distance away were some more small grass enclosures for a shower, toilet and kitchen. Each camp had similar amenities with a small staff including a cook, waiter and bedroom attendant. Our rucksacks were waiting in the shade of a large tree, brought here by porters following an alternative route.

At 3.30 in the afternoon, when the heat of the sun had diminished, we set off for another short walk, returning just before sunset. That night, we all experienced a small tingle of fear at the eerie and unfamiliar sounds all around. Hippos guffawed, impala sneezed and puku whistled their alarm calls. Lions roared mournfully in the distance. But most mysterious was a rumbling and gurgling noise which moved slowly past the hut in the middle of the night. Next morning we learnt that we had been listening to the gurgling of elephants' stomachs.

The meanders and tributaries of the Luangwa River have carved the floor of the valley into a series of islands, lagoons and oxbow lakes, attracting large numbers of game and birds, especially as the dry season (April to November) progresses and the smaller pools evaporate. To get to the next camp involved finding a shallow spot to wade across the river. Although the air was warm, the water was very cold, and the experience of squelching ankle-deep in mud and knee deep in water soon had us all wide awake.

We entered a woodland of mopane trees. Many were dead, having had most of their bark removed by elephants who seem to relish this fibrous addition to their diet. Suddenly, in the distance, we heard a strange rattle like the sound of exploding fireworks. It was repeated a few minutes later, and then there was silence. Total silence. Even the birds

Left above: the Luangwa River teems with hippos, and visitors to the Park often mistake their bellows for the roaring of lions. We even encountered hippos on the road, miles from the River, on their way to raid the village crops. This particular male had been kicked out of his herd and was 'sulking' in the shallows. **Below left:** there are thousands of buffalo in the Park. In the open they are timid but surprisingly docile. **Below right:** a nocturnal civit, its hackles up, disturbed during an evening game-drive.



seemed to have lost the urge to sing. What we had heard was the automatic weapon fire of a gang of poachers.

Several days later the mutilated corpses of seven elephants were found within a few hundred metres of each other. One was the body of a calf whose ivory could not have been more than a few centimetres long. It was a sobering reminder of yet another battle of life and death being waged in the Park. So far, however, the Save the Rhino Trust's anti-poaching patrols have held their own against the poachers.

During the remaining days of the safari, we enjoyed one memorable wildlife experience after another. We got within 50 metres of a rhino which we had spotted sleeping on its side in long grass. It was also surprising how docile buffalo appeared when approached in open country. They exhibited all the curiosity of domestic cattle. Even a herd of several hundred animals could be coaxed nearer by whistling or making other suitably encouraging noises. Nevertheless, it was comforting to know that there were plenty of trees nearby in case their advances were not entirely friendly! The most difficult animals to approach were the giraffe and eland. With their tree-top view, the giraffes always saw us

first, and would be cantering away long before we saw them.

The Luangwa Valley is, without a doubt, a naturalist's paradise. The Lithgows, who manage Chibembe Lodge, have taken great pains to offer their guests reasonable comfort, but without sacrificing the adventurous side of a walking safari. With expert and enthusiastic guides and the opportunity to meet the animals on equal terms in brilliant sunshine, the holiday becomes an experience without comparison.

Tourist information

- For more information about Luangwa National Park and Chibembe Lodge, contact the *Zambian National Tourist Board*, 163 Piccadilly, London W1 (tel: 01-493 0848).
 - For flight information, contact *Zambia Airways Corporation*, 163 Piccadilly, London W1 (tel: 01-491 7521).
- A return flight from Heathrow to Mfuwe costs between £700 and £1,500, depending on date and duration of stay.
- Walking safaris starting from Chibembe Lodge, and other Zambian wildlife holidays can be arranged by *Twickers World*, 22 Church St., Twickenham TW1 3NW (tel: 01-892 7606).