

Rivers of change

By Tony Park

News.com.au, February 11, 2006

<http://www.news.com.au/travel/story/0,23483,18144543-27987,00.html>

PAUL Nogoma, our guide, tells us to listen. "There is a leopard there," he whispers from the driver's seat of the dust-covered, open-topped Land Cruiser. We obey, eyes and ears straining, but hear only the shrieks of a group of young baboons and one older, wiser primate bellowing across the hard-baked surface of a dried oxbow lake, a once-flowing tendril of Zambia's Luangwa River.

"The baboons are saying there is a leopard there, in the bush. They are trying to chase him away," Nogoma tells us.

All safari guides point out animals but good ones, such as Nogoma, let you peek over their shoulder as they read the bush.

Sure enough, after long minutes of staring, the sleek, powerful, dappled bulk of one very big and very peeved leopard emerges from a thicket of mopane and slinks away, to the tumultuous joy of the baboons. The score is monkeys 1, cat 0, but Nogoma assures his four awed tourists the odds will be reversed come nightfall.

In the folklore of African safari destinations, in which myth and marketing often overshadow truth, South Luangwa National Park in eastern Zambia is touted as the place to see leopards, the most elusive of the big cats.

If two three-hour game drives in the park from Robin Pope Safaris' Nkwali Camp are any indication, this is one African destination that lives up to its hype.

Zambian-born Pope greets us at Nkwali and I do a double take. "Hello, I'm Robin," says a quietly spoken man wearing metal-framed glasses who looks more visiting academic than

bwana bushman. Pope is recognised by operators in Africa as a pioneer of walking safaris in the bush and one of the best.

Before us, the Luangwa is brown and sluggish, as reluctant to move in the stifling heat at the end of the dry season as are two or four-legged animals in the middle of the day.

After our adrenalin-charged morning game drive under a killer sun, we crawl beneath the thatch to siesta the afternoon away in one of Nkwali's airy bungalows, with a wide glassless window that allows the odd hippo honk (oddly soothing for an animal with such a killer reputation) to lull us to sleep.

The next day brings another leopard and a healthy pack of 24 African wild dogs, the continent's most endangered mammal. Even the veteran animal-spotters on board our vehicle drop their cool and jabber excitedly all the way back to camp.

From Nkwali we transfer to Nsefu, one of Pope's satellite camps deep in the national park. The small clutch of rondavels (round huts) that makes up this fenceless outpost is on a bend in the Luangwa and literally surrounded by animals. Dainty puku antelope graze quietly while baboons scamper and fight. At night, elephants feed from seed pods beneath a tree outside our room, close enough for us to hear their tummies rumbling.

There's a feeling of blissful remoteness at Nsefu, coupled with an edginess reinforced by stories of leopards and lions prowling between the huts, and the fact that watchful camp manager, Jason, has his binoculars ever present, even at the dinner table.

In the late afternoon we rouse ourselves, like the just-waking lions we come across at dusk. While we humans are on the hunt for game sightings, the lion and lioness have procreation in mind – a tooth-and-claws-bared act of borderline savagery.

We approach the lions through a dry sandy donga: they are on the bank just above our line of vision. It's a new and slightly scary experience to be looking up, not down, at a pair of 200kg cats. Imagine a mouse's-eye view of your household moggy. We watch the red sun disappear and a pumpkin moon rise while sipping gin and tonics and chilled beers within distant sight of the mating couple.

Although still a poor country, even by African standards, Zambia is experiencing a mini-boom in tourism, partly because of the misfortunes of neighbouring Zimbabwe, now shunned by international visitors. It's on the country's two main rivers, the Luangwa and the Zambezi, that one can see the best of the country's wildlife and the most evidence of Zambia's growing prosperity.

If your African dream includes Robert Redford and Meryl Streep, a wind-up gramophone and white-gloved waiters serving G&Ts from cut glass, then dream on, because it doesn't really exist.

However, it is re-created at a few pukka places, such as the River Club, on the upper reaches of the Zambezi. It sits in sedate, anachronistic splendour 50km and 100 years upstream from thundering Victoria Falls.

The River Club's owner, Peter Jones, is a former British army officer and the club's dark-panelled main building, which houses a dining room, lounge and library, is more Denys Finch-Hatton than Karen Blixen. (However, women are welcome.)

Dinners are a bit military mess-like, with guests at one long table presided over by Jones or one of his senior staff. When the port decanter is passed (from the left, of course, old boy), I half expect a toast to the Queen and regiment to follow. The saving grace of the River Club, though, is that for all its affected trappings of colonial yesteryear, it stops short of being pretentious or stuffed-shirt.

Away from Jones's headquarters, 10 thoughtfully designed chalets – consisting of thatched roofs and three walls, the fourth opening to the bush – allow maximum breezy views of the mighty Zambezi River and are perfect havens.

But this end of the Zambezi is more about doing things rather than lazing by the pool. You don't have to bungy-jump, bridge-swing (think human pendulum, with lots of screaming) or skydive, but a trip to view Victoria Falls is a must and, for a reality check, the River Club can also arrange a visit to the nearby village of Somonga, where many of its staff live.

From previous visits I know the Zambezi River downstream of Lake Kariba's dam wall is hands-down the most beautiful place in Africa, but the great thing is that my (failing) memory can never fully do it justice. The river seems to improve with every visit. I have never arrived here by air, and as the barely post-pubescent pilot of our tiny Cessna rides the turbulence like a rodeo cowboy as he approaches Jeki airstrip, it's a thrill to spot elephants from the air for the first time.

They splash through shallows and, further inland, amble off the runway, which is really just a wide expanse of trampled elephant dust in the middle of Zambia's Lower Zambezi National Park.

The sun is merciless, the dust choking and the tsetse flies murderous. The flies are concentrated away from the river, so it's a double blessing to arrive at Sausage Tree Camp on the banks of the Zambezi and feel a cool breeze off the water. While the camp offers productive game drives in the national park, you have to be on the Zambezi to fully appreciate it, so our game viewing and exploring will be by water craft.

A canoe trip down the Chifungulu Channel is surreal: away from the wide main river, the crystal-clear narrow waterways of the channel are flanked by lush green meadows. I could be in the home counties of England, except for pods of honking hippo and the odd leering crocodile.

It's not a strenuous trip (there is one guide and one tourist in each canoe) as the guide does all the work. There are long periods of silent drifting, punctuated by seconds of flashing paddles and churning waters as the flotilla hurries to pass a cranky territorial bull hippo.

In the afternoon we take our drinks on the river, cruising past elephants and buffaloes, catching fleeting glimpses of exotic birds. The malachite kingfisher has an almost impossible array of colours crammed on to a body that would fit in the palm of your hand.

The accommodation at Sausage Tree Camp in the lower Zambezi is different from Africa's more common designer thatch and mud brick. Here it's low, solid walls with a lofty Bedouin-style canopy. We have our own muchinda, or butler, who wakes us with tea and

coffee and escorts us back to bed each night to keep us safe from wandering lions, elephants and buffaloes.

The presence of a butler doesn't seem so strange when we learn later that our boatman, Tryford, is a prince, related to the chieftainess of Chiawa, the head of the nearest village and the lands to the west of the national park.

Prince Tryford takes us fishing on the last evening (despite the slowly improving economy, even royalty have to work to make ends meet in Zambia) and choreographs the trip to perfection.

First he lands a smallish example of the Zambezi's hard-fighting tiger fish, to show us how it's done and to warn us about its rows of razor-sharp teeth. As the sun turns from orange to red-gold, I land a 5.5kg specimen after much bending of back and rod, all within charging distance of three grazing bull elephants.

Across the river from us is Zimbabwe. In this stretch, the bush is as full of animals as on the Zambian side and the Zambezi no less beautiful: it's just the tourists who are missing.

As the escarpment towering behind the river turns deep purple in shadow, a lion calls from the far bank, but his lowing roar sounds more mournful than frightening. We drift along the Zimbabwe shore for a while, but the lion and his ladies, who softly answer, are nowhere to be seen. His highness Prince Tryford starts the outboard and we turn away from the darkness, towards the flickering lamplights of Zambia.

Tony Park is the author of two novels set in southern Africa: Far Horizon and Zambezi (Pan Macmillan Australia). He was a guest of the Classic Safari Company.