

the destination

zambia



AS GOOD AS IT GETS

TRUNK ROUTE: Expect the unexpected in Zambia's Kafue National Park, like this bull elephant which interrupted our lunch on the Kafue River when he and a buddy crossed and started ripping down a tree next to our campsite.

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I have travelled all over Africa, and been to some remarkable places. Few can equal the Busanga Plains. It is remote, virtually untouched and only accessible for just over four months of the year



SEEKING SERENITY: An early morning boat drive on the Kafue River is one of the nicest ways to start the day.

STORY AND PICTURES BY
TONY WEAVER



IT WAS a half evil day in Africa, 333, half the mark of the beast. Three leopards, three lions, three cheetahs (one of them on a fresh impala kill). Not to forget the 14 wild dogs, the herd of close to 100 elephant, close to 1 000 red lechwe on the flood plains in front of our camp, the herd of sable antelope, the civet, the serval, the roan antelope, Lichtenstein's hartebeest, Boehm's zebra, white-tailed mon-goose, side striped jackal and did I mention the 14 wild dogs?

We were a group of seasoned African travellers. Between us we had been to Chobe, Moremi, Savuti, the Okavango Delta, the Serengeti, the Ngorongoro Crater, North and South Luangwa, Selous and just about every other national park and game reserve in between, and we all agreed that that day was quite possibly the most exceptional wildlife day any of us had ever had anywhere in Africa.

And that the Busanga Plains, in the far north of Zambia's Kafue National Park, is one of the most extraordinary destinations in Africa.

It began at sunrise. We traversed the 200m-long boardwalk across the wetlands to our vehicles and headed out in two vehicles with guides Ferrison Kalembelembe and Tyrone McKeith. Six minutes later, we found two lionesses and a lion, and as we stopped to check them out, a stream of elephants began emerging from the distant plains, heading for the Kapinga Forest.

Half an hour later, a couple of highly agitated yellow-billed kites bombing a target led us straight to the cheetah kill. It's just like that on the Busanga.

I have travelled all over Africa, and been to some remarkable places. Few can equal the Busanga Plains. Remote, virtually untouched (there are just three safari camps on the plains) and only accessible for just over four months of the year, the plains had long been on my list of dream destinations. Then, in October, I was able to team up with a small group (Mukambi Plains Camp, where we stayed, only accommodates eight people at a time in four luxury Meru safari tents) for a three-night stay.

Mukambi Plains Camp is owned and run by Mukambi Safari Lodge on the banks of the Kafue River in the game management area just outside the Kafue National Park (the area around the main lodge teems with game). Mukambi is one of the focal points for tourism into the central section of the Kafue National Park, just off the main Lusaka to Mongu road that bisects the park from east to west. It's a delightful lodge in its own right, managed by the affable and uber-efficient Jacques and Linda van Heerden, who have previously worked at Barra Lodge in Mozambique, and in the Quirimbas, among others.

On the evening of our arrival at the Plains Camp, I specifically requested Ferrison as our guide, as his encyclopaedic knowledge of the



WELL SPOTTED: We came across this magnificent female leopard reclining in an acacia tree on a termite island.

For even the most-seasoned of travellers in Africa, Mukambi Plains Camp offers something quite out of the ordinary



BUSH MEN: Two of Mukambi Plains Camp's expert guides, Tyrone McKeith and Ferrison Kalembelembe.

birds of the area is legendary. I was armed with a list of "specials" that I wanted to see, and Ferrison found almost all of them for us. In just one evening drive, we spotted (among many others) Fulleborn's and pink-throated longclaw, *Lualaba cisticola*, red-capped lark, brown firefinch, grey-backed shrike, swallow-tailed bee-eater, orange-breasted bush shrike, red-and yellow-billed oxpecker, lesser and greater jacana, wattled and crowned cranes, openbill, yellow-billed marabout and saddle-billed storks, squacco, rufous-bellied, green-backed and grey herons and coppery-tailed, Senegal and black coucals.

The same evening, in the other vehicle, driven by Tyrone, went in the opposite direction, and we witnessed a pride of lion killing a red lechwe. Just another day on the Busanga Plains.

It's an extraordinary undertaking, maintaining and running a camp in a remote area like the Busanga, made even more extraordinary by the fact that it is only accessible for just over four months of the year. It really is like

a mini-Okavango Delta, with hundreds of channels that fill up with water when the Lufupa River, and its feeder tributary, the Lushimba, overflow their banks and the area floods from around early November until June or July (older maps call the area the Busanga Swamps). And here's the rub: every year, just before the camp gets cut off by the rising flood waters, the entire lodge gets dismantled, and all the equipment and furniture is piled up on the dining room table on the lounge deck, and stored there under tarpaulins for the duration of the rainy season. All the linen, cutlery and the camp library are taken out to the main lodge at Mukambi.

Tyrone takes up the tale: "We come in in May depending on the rains, two months before the season starts. We drive as close as we can to the island, about 12km away, and walk the rest of the way. We have to rebuild the camp almost from scratch, re-thatch all the structures, seal and treat all the wood. We carry in 50kg bags of cement, toilet basins, steel drums, water pumps – last time around it

Mukambi

The stay: Mukambi Plains Camp accommodates a maximum of eight guests in four luxury, en-suite Meru safari tents. All activities, all drinks, meals, transfers from and to Mukambi Safari Lodge and park fees are included in the daily rate, while children under 12 years pay half price – children under nine are not allowed unless the camp is block booked. Minimum stay at Busanga is three nights, unless you are in your own self-drive vehicle.

The rates: Mukambi has regular specials which are available (as is their rates card) through their website, www.mukambi.com, or you can e-mail Jacques or Linda van Heerden and their management team on info@mukambi.com. Their combination packages, which mix several days at the gorgeous main lodge, Mukambi Safari Lodge with three nights at Busanga, are particularly well priced, and they also have "last minute" and "local" specials.

was me with 15 workers. "When we start out, we can only do one trip a day from the vehicles, as we get fitter, we manage two. "For food, we catch barbel off the deck and eat it with *mshima* (pap), roasted field mice are tasty, we sometimes have tomatoes, plus we grow chillies around camp. When we open for the season in mid-July, we have to bring everything in – gas bottles, food, drink, linen, cutlery, for 12km. When the waters subside and the first guests come in, we usually have to either walk or use *mokoros* (dug out canoes) for the last 2km." It's a remarkable undertaking, and even more remarkable is that we were served gourmet meals despite the remoteness and the logistical challenges (it is a five-to seven-hour drive from Mukambi's main lodge to the Busanga Plains). We left the plains after three days and nights, knowing we had been in one of Africa's most special wild places. I'll be back. ● Weaver paid for his own trip to Zambia, but was a guest of Mukambi at their Plains Camp.