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### Zambia underfoot: On the ground at Zebra Plains

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By **McClatchy Newspapers**  
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MFUWE, Zambia -- We're nodding off in our tent, pitched under a tree, when the crunching and gnashing begin.

It's the hippos again, a half-dozen massive beasts climbing up from the Luangwa River for their nightly feed. During September, a hot, dry month here at Zebra Plains Camp, in northeast Zambia, the tree's foot-long fruit hang low, an irresistible meal for diners with gaping jaws and fist-size grinders.



Photo by McClatchy Newspapers

Silence falls as the hippos lumber away. For a moment we doze. Then the bushes rustle and the elephants arrive, treading gently to avoid our plastic ground cloth and canvas patio chairs.

I fall asleep wondering who decided to pitch the tent under a sausage tree. Intentional, perhaps, or a prank, to give the dudes a thrill? But Garth Hovell, manager at Zebra Plains, a walking safari camp in the most remote sector of the South Luangwa National Park, shakes his head. "No way," he says. With 20 years of bush experience, Hovell, head naturalist for Sanctuary Retreats' five Zambian lodges, says that here in the bush, where we're the intruders, safety is Rule One.

Thornicroft Giraffes have adapted to reach the leaves in the treetops.

The Luangwa River, pristine and undammed, is the reason we -- and the wildlife -- are here at Zebra Plains, near the national park's northern border. Flowing in wide, curving loops over fertile plains and through wild miombo woodland, the Luangwa supports an immense diversity of species, a veritable Zambian ark.

From elephants to antelope, lions to leopards and crocodiles to hippos, all flourish within this vast wildlife refuge.

Walking-only safari camps, like Zebra Plains, are probably this decade's biggest news in African safaris -- and ironically, the oldest. The first Europeans to venture deep into the Dark Continent -- glory-seeking adventurers, greedy miners and relentless missionaries -- expected to walk. Even after trucks and jeeps arrived, hunters and photographers bunked in tents, stalked their quarry on foot and thrilled to the charge of angry lions.

Most safari lodges are commercial enterprises, of course, relying on a half-dozen off-road vehicles and guides who radio big animal sightings from guide to guide. Guests get what they've paid for: guaranteed close-ups of lions yawning and trumpeting elephants. Luxury is the norm as is a large staff, including a chef, dish washers, maids, laundresses and the fix-it crew.

"That's not Zebra Plains," Hovell said. "We're designed for people who've been on safari before but are tired of sitting in a vehicle. Curious people who ... want to hear dry grass crackle underfoot and smell the earth," he said.

Our days began at 6 a.m. while the air was cool and the animals were active. On day one we headed for a distant loop of the Chibembe River, led by Mathews, the camp's armed guard, rifle loaded and at the ready. Hovell followed toting binoculars and a day pack with a first-aid kit, loaner hats, survival gear, extra water and sun lotion.

We six, dressed in khakis (tan makes the best camouflage), fell in behind. Guide Rabson Banda walking shotgun, kept us bunched up tight. Predators like to pick on stragglers, he told us with a grin. Banda's backpack overflowed with the tea things: a portable gas stove, pot, cups, tea bags, cookies, brownies and water.

Here and there groups of tiny puku grazed calmly, lifting their heads to watch us pass. Three giraffe and sable antelope were more wary, moving into a grove of mopane trees. After an hour walking, stopping to identify plants and telltale spoor, Mathews and Hovell pulled up short and bent over to inspect a lion track. With a zing of fear, we stood still and peered left and right until Hovell spied two lionesses at 50 yards, half hidden in deep grass. For a long minute they stared at us, unmoving, and then they were gone, fleeing the other way.

Each day followed a similar pattern. Morning game drives lasted from 6 to 11 a.m. followed by lunch and downtime for a shower, journal notations or photo downloads. From 4 to 6 p.m., we set out again, now searching for the elephant family approaching the river, or to watch the hippos grunt and growl, jockeying for position.

At twilight we gathered around the campfire for a glass of wine, some surprisingly appealing dishes and an evening of stories and stars. Escorted back to our tent by a game-wise guide with a flashlight (sometimes Isaac our porter and guard, and sometimes Milemia or Rabson) -- we took a warm shower, crawled under the mosquito netting onto a first-class mattress and fell asleep to the hippo chorus.

Because walking safaris are specialized, choosing an itinerary that includes stays at other lodges

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is a good way to broaden your experience. Sanctuary Retreats has five Zambian lodges, each different from the others. Driving safaris are most popular, but several lodges lead guided walks as well. Having done both, I confess that I like the convenience, comfort and range that a vehicle provides. But if you're like me, you won't say you've really seen Zambia until you've walked the walk.

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Crime in the city is statistically low, but with downtown gunfire last week, including the fatal shooting of an Urbana man, Frederick residents are concerned about safety.

### Fire and police blotter: Apartment fire sends two to hospital

Apartment fire sends two to hospital

### Recent incidents of gunfire and other violence in Frederick

Aug. 8: A man was shot in the arm in the 1100 block of Key Parkway. Police made an arrest shortly after the shooting. Charges have since been dropped.

### Sister returns to cheer for brothers at Tuscarora HS

Jessica Sheridan planned to give more than three cheers for the Tuscarora Titans football team Friday.

### Men in heels bring in \$40K for Heartly House

As Forrest Gump said, you can tell a lot about a person by their shoes. And more than 150 men who donned heels to walk a mile through downtown Frederick on Saturday were trying to send a very loud and clear message with their footwear.

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