

ADVERTISEMENT

PACYBER OPEN HOUSE!! OCT. 18TH - 6PM TO 8PM
 The Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School
 351 HARVEY AVENUE, GREENSBURG, PA 15601
 216 NORTH HIGHLAND AVENUE, PITTSBURGH, PA 15206
 155 LAKE DRIVE, WEXFORD, PA 15090
 1.888.PACYBER

Zambia's Zebra Plains is like Noah's Ark in Luangwa National Park

ADVERTISEMENT

July 15, 2012 12:14 am



Click image to enlarge

Steve Haggerty/MCT

Thomicroft giraffes have adapted to reach the leaves in the tree tops.

Share with others:

Print
 Email
 Read Later

What are the benefits of a 30-Year Fixed Rate?

 NMLS# 2229
 PA Department Of Banking 20083
 www.unmco.com

Latest Mortgage Rates
 Current Last Week
[30 Year Fixed](#)
[15 Year Fixed](#)
[5/1 ARM](#)
 Mortgage Calculator Affordability Calculator
 Refinance Loans FHA Loans
 Loan Modifications Home Equity Loans
[Zillow Mortgage Marketplace](#) [See local rates](#)

By Anne Z. Cooke / McClatchy-Tribune News Service

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.

Silence falls as the hippos lumber away. For a moment we doze -- well wine and dined after a long day tramping through the bush, tracking wild game. Then the bushes rustle and the elephants arrive, treading gently to avoid our plastic ground cloth and canvas patio chairs. Amazed at how quietly those huge feet step, we peer out through our screened windows, spotting a shifting shadow reaching for the top branches.

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, Mr. Hovell, head naturalist for Sanctuary Retreats' five Zambian lodges, says that here in the bush, where we're the intruders, safety is Rule One. No blood allowed on his watch is what I'm thinking.

"If it gets much hotter you'll thank the tree for such big branches," says Milemia Banda, guide and second-in-command, with a twinkle. "And anyway, the animals are more afraid of you than you are of them. With no roads, no vehicles and no airplanes in this sector, they rarely see or hear people. To them a tent is like a tree, something to walk around."

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. "Living with them, you really feel close to the animals," says Mr. Hovell.

LATEST IN LIFE
 Presque Isle a perfect place for the youngsters
about 12 hours ago
 A critic's quandary: When's the right time to review a restaurant?
about 13 hours ago
 Hotel websites link to TripAdvisor reviews
about 13 hours ago
 Jersey Shore, Pennsylvania, has plenty to offer except sand and surf
about 13 hours ago
 App: The Politicash 2012
about 13 hours ago
 TripAdvisor: Takeout food can take bite out of travel expenses
about 13 hours ago

PG Q3 Poll
 How closely would you say you are following the Pittsburgh Pirates right now?
 Very closely
 Somewhat closely
 Not at all

"And you'll see them, once you know where to look."

2.64% 2.67%
2.50% 2.60%

During the dry season, August through mid-October, inland waterholes dry up, pushing wildlife toward the river. It also brings them closer to our camp and to the sausage trees.

Like them, your feet will be the only transport available during your stay at Zebra Plains, a reminder that hiking boots are in order. Except for the three-hour drive from the Mfuwe airport -- and the return when you leave -- walking will take you across the plains, along the river bank and to the campfire for appetizers and a sundowner. "The road ends here so we have to walk the last bit, less than a quarter mile," Mr. Hovell announced when we first arrived. "I want you to see the river and the camp on foot. You need to experience it the way the early explorers did."

Digesting that unwelcome news (jet lag is a buzz kill) we managed smiles for the three camp staff who hoisted our heavy suitcases up onto their heads and fell into line.

Walking-only safari camps, like Zebra Plains, are probably this decade's biggest news in African safaris -- and also 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.

The first guest-organized walking camp was founded south of Zebra Plains in 1961 by Norman Carr, a former ranger and lifelong environmentalist. Since then, hard-core walking camps have become Zambia's signature.

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, mostly local people, from manager, rangers and guides to the chef, dish washers, maids, laundresses and the fix-it crew.

"That's not Zebra Plains," said Mr. Hovell. "We're designed for people who've been on safari before but are tired of sitting in a vehicle. ... They want to hear dry grass crackle underfoot and smell the earth," he said, as we gathered in the mess tent for a first-day orientation. In the days ahead, he promised, we'd track sign (footprints and spoor), be alert for unexpected encounter, and "see the animals the way they really are in nature."

As in all game lodges, our days began at 6 a.m. while the air was cool and the animals 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. Mr. 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. Mr. 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 tell-tale spoor, Mathews and Mr. 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 Mr. 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 6-11 a.m. followed by lunch and down time for a shower, journal notations or photo downloads. From 4-6 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 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.

ADVERTISEMENT



If you go ... Zambia Plains

Zebra Plains is open from June through Oct. 31 only; for more see www.sanctuaryretreats.com. The all-inclusive rate per person per night, sharing a tent, is \$585. Sanctuary's other Zambian lodges include Chichele Presidential Lodge and Puku Ridge, near Mfuwe; Sussi & Chuma in Livingstone; and Zambezi Kalefu Camp, near Lusaka.

Other booking options: Most game lodge companies will book their clients into any Zambian or South African lodge, regardless of who owns or manages it. If you find something you can't miss, your booking agent should be able to add it to your tour. It's routine.

Getting there: We prefer South African Airways, flying nonstop to Johannesburg, South Africa, from New York's JFK Airport or from Washington, D.C. Dulles International Airport.

SAA's connecting flights continue north to Livingstone (on Zambia's southern border); another flight continues to Lusaka, Zambia's capital city; and the last goes on to Mfuwe, south of Zebra Plains. Pack a bag of snacks and a thick paperback novel and you'll be ready for the trek. The last leg, a three-hour drive into camp, isn't just transportation. It's a game drive in itself, with views of wildlife, native villages and giant baobob trees.

Recommended guides: Only one Zambia guidebook is worth the time you'll spend reading and rereading it: "Zambia: The Bradt Travel Guide," by Chris McIntyre, \$28.99, distributed in the U.S. by Globe Pequot Press.

Mr. McIntyre, a longtime Africa traveler and writer, pulls out the stops to deliver a work that abounds in wildlife description, environmental and political issues, social history, tribal groups, language differences, best lodges and hotels, town sights, early and recent history, reading lists, anecdotes, tips, maps and distances.

He informs in a conversational tone and entertains with personal comments and understated humor. The book sports 58 glossy photos of places, people, animals and birds, and this when most guidebook publishers no longer spend on illustrations.

The second Bradt Guidebook, "Zambia & Malawi," \$26.99, is authored by a group of writers. This book is a good choice if your trip is short and you're visiting both countries. The book reflects Bradt's focus on quality, and provides solid information, superior maps and color photos.

Zebra Plains

Zebra Plains is open from June through Oct. 31 only; for more see www.sanctuaryretreats.com. The all-inclusive rate per person per night, sharing a tent, is \$585. Sanctuary's other Zambian lodges include Chichele Presidential Lodge and Puku Ridge, near Mfuwe; Sussi & Chuma in Livingstone; and Zambezi Kalefu Camp, near Lusaka.

Other booking options: Most game lodge companies will book their clients into any Zambian or South African lodge, regardless of who owns or manages it. If you find something you can't miss, your booking agent should be able to add it to your tour. It's routine.

Getting there: We prefer South African Airways, flying nonstop to Johannesburg, South Africa, from New York's JFK Airport or from Washington, D.C., Dulles International Airport.

SAA's connecting flights continue north to Livingstone (on Zambia's southern border); another flight continues to Lusaka, Zambia's capital city; and the last goes on to Mfuwe, south of Zebra Plains. Pack a bag of snacks and a thick paperback novel and you'll be ready for the trek. The last leg, a three-hour drive into camp, isn't just transportation. It's a game drive in itself, with views of wildlife, native villages and giant baobob trees.

Recommended guides: Only one Zambia guidebook is worth the time you'll spend reading and rereading it: "Zambia: The Bradt Travel Guide," by Chris McIntyre, \$28.99, distributed in the U.S. by Globe Pequot Press.

Mr. McIntyre, a longtime Africa traveler and writer, pulls out the stops to deliver a work that abounds in wildlife description, environmental and political issues, social history, tribal groups, language differences, best lodges and hotels, early and recent history, anecdotes, tips, maps and distances.

He informs in a conversational tone and entertains with personal comments and understated humor. The book sports 58 glossy photos of places, people, animals and birds, and this when most guidebook publishers no longer spend on illustrations.

The second Bradt Guidebook, "Zambia & Malawi," \$26.99, is authored by a group of writers. This book is a good choice if your trip is short and you're visiting both countries. The book

reflects Mr. Bradd's focus on quality and provides solid information, superior maps and color photos.

First Published July 15, 2012 12:00 am

RECOMMENDED VIDEOS



Port Authority workers begin voting on contract (8/19/2012)



Fans react as Pirates' season draws to close (10/3/2012)



Steelers Report: Player reaction on DeCastro, Wallace news (8/27/2012)



Blood Sugar Tip: Are You on a Dangerous Ride? Medix Select (8/1/2012)

by Taboola

Sponsored

More From Post-Gazette.com

- The Obama illusion
- Romney's unreality
- Pitt football's next task: Eliminating crucial mistakes
- Penguins prospect proves fearless after bout with injuries
- Romney's victory: The spin doctors are wrong

More from the web

- Every NHL Team's Softest Player (Bleacher Report)
- How Did Former QB Vince Young Blow \$30 Million In Three Years? Look At All The Crazy Isht He Spent His Money On! (Bossip)
- Top 10 Football Stadiums (Reader's Digest)
- Beauties on the Gridiron (Fox Business)
- Titans' Murdock Found Dead of Gunshot as Police Suspect Suicide (Bloomberg.com)

[?]



Get the PG delivered to your home

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Get electronic editions delivered to your computer



The Pittsburgh Press



Get PG apps for your smartphone and iPad

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette for iPad



An exclusive online community for Pittsburgh sports fans



Posters, books, DVDs, sports items and more



Copyright ©1997—2012 PG Publishing Co., Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

- HOME
- NEWS
- LOCAL
- SPORTS
- OPINION
- A & E
- LIFE
- BUSINESS
- VIDEO
- PHOTO
- CLASSIFIEDS
- JOBS
- SHOPPING
- CARS
- REAL ESTATE

- Contact Us
- Site Map
- Terms of Use
- Privacy Policy
- Advertise
- About Us
- Help
- Corrections
- RSS Feeds
- Feedback
- Report a Technical Problem

- PG Sites:
- PG+
- Pipeline
- Blogs
- Community
- Voices
- Early Returns
- Sports Town
- PG Store
- Pittsburgh Mom

- Social Media:
- Twitter:
- News
- Customer Care
- Facebook
- Pinterest
- feedback
- Print:
- Home Delivery
- Payment
- Vacation
- Address Chan
- Rates
- Customer Ser
- Delivery
- Questions
- Back Copies
- Specials
- Gift
- Subscriptions
- Newsstand
- FAQ