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Wide-eyed in Zambia: Africa's last great place



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MFUWE, Zambia — Alex Stewart, waiting on the steps of Bilimungwe Lodge, deep in the Zambian bush, likes nothing better than surprising first-time visitors to this wilderness outpost with an introduction to the next-door neighbors.

“Come in, come in, you’re just in time,” she urges, a twinkle in her eye, leading me to the rear deck of the lodge, one of six Bushcamp Company lodges in the South Luangwa National Park. When she points to the backyard waterhole, I get it.



There they are, two female elephants and a baby, splashing each other, cooling off on this hot October day.



“Junior is a year old now,” says Stewart, beaming as the little guy rolls over and over in a bathtub-shaped hole, smacking the water with his trunk and feet, the very image of a 4-year-old let loose in a wading pool.

“And that’s Harry,” adds Stewart, as a hefty hippopotamus rises up in the water, blinks at the commotion and sinks back down. “He walks over from the Luangwa River to get away from the other males,” she says, tossing back her hair, a thick white mane. “He likes it here, where he’s top dog.”

After 26 hours and three flights from California to Zambia, in southern Africa, with a three-hour drive from Bushcamp’s Mfuwe Lodge to Bilimungwe, I was

dragging. But not for long.

I'd forgotten how it feels on your first day in the bush. Exhilarated and wide-eyed. Over the moon. And then, sobering up, eager but cautious. A safari lodge is a thousand times better than any zoo, but you — not the animals — are the ones in the cage.

“You need to be aware, to look around you, and especially, never go out at night without an escort,” says Bushcamp manager Amy Alderman. The safe way to watch lions is from an off-road vehicle, which the big cats ignore.

When your tracker climbs up on the fender and your guide shifts gears, the adventure begins, a search for the legendary “Big Five,” (lions, leopards, elephants, hippos and buffalo); and the “Lesser Eleven”: hyenas, zebras, impalas, bushbucks, giraffe, wildebeest, rhinos, wild dogs, crocodiles, civets and genets.

Why this trip, our fourth to the region? Steve, my husband, showed me a South African Airways ticket sale online, and I said it was too good to pass up. And we had a plan.

Fly from Washington, D.C., to Johannesburg, then north to Lusaka and Mfuwe, transfer to Mfuwe Lodge, then to Bilimungwe and later to Chamilandu. Next,

fly south to Livingston for a couple of days at the Islands of Siankaba, the riverside resort in the Zambezi River.

Finally, a flight to Skukuza, in South Africa, for a visit to Earth Lodge and Bush Lodge, in the 160,000-acre Sabi Sabi Private Game Reserve, on the border of Kruger National Park. Sixteen days, five game-lodge destinations, and none of them alike.

I picked Bilimungwe and Chamilandu for the location, in the wilderness and off the grid. With rustic cabins, six to eight guests, friendly staff, first-class guides and a dedication to wildlife preservation, they sounded perfect.

Built of logs, planks, reeds and thatching, the cabins were a work of art. And with striped pillows, African colors, flush toilet, running water, screens and a single solar-powered nightlight, I felt right at home. But the lodges weren't identical.

Bilimungwe looked over a waterhole; Chamilandu had a river view and a "hide" above an elephant path. Chamilandu's dinners were served by the river; at Bilimungwe we ate on the deck by candlelight, sharing wine and hashing over the day's surprises.

The lions that killed and ate the buffalo, the bush babies in the Mahogany tree and the discovery — to our mutual astonishment — that our fellow guests, a

couple from England, live next door to my English cousins.

Manda Chisanga, our guide, the award-winning naturalist and a keen-eyed tracker, was both tireless and professional. “Did you hear that?” he asked. “It’s an Eagle Owl. He’s on that tree branch, there, no, to the left. And over there, the grass is moving but there’s no wind tonight. Do you see the leopard?”

We bonded when I told him I drive a 48-year old car with a dented fender, and disbelieving, he cracked a smile, then broke down laughing. “No, you don’t really, do you? That’s too funny,” he said, shaking his head, chortling just as we spotted a pair of hyenas.

Steve picked the next destination, the Islands of Siankaba, on an island in the mighty Zambezi, where the river is wide and shallow. Spectacular views from the lodge take it all in, from the trees in the foreground to Zimbabwe, on the river’s far side.

The patio, with tables and chairs, flower beds and a fountain, was the gathering place. Our bedroom, one of seven tented cabins connected by swinging bridges, clung to the bank above the high water mark.

Sleeping late we relaxed, swam in the pool, took a sunset cruise, joined an off-island picnic and got into a mokoro (canoe) for a guided ride, launched from

the dock. Dinner times were especially busy; the restaurant has a local following.

With Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park next door, game drives were available. But we passed them up to spend a day with a young, college-educated Zambian couple, Bill and Susan (not their real names).

Comparing cultures, we played “straight man-funny man,” trading jests about housing prices, the cost of gas, favorite vegetables, names for babies, strange wedding ceremonies and the number of cows it takes to buy a bride. Trevor Noah, the comedian, and a South African native, would have fit right in.

We spent our last week in South Africa at two very different safari lodges, the starkly minimalist Earth Lodge and its partner, Bush Camp, a family-friendly resort, both in the Sabi Sabi Private Game Reserve.

Despite a day lost to rain, we didn’t miss a drive, bouncing over the hills in comfortable vehicles, with rain gear on board and miles of new territory to explore. When our guide and tracker, Lazarus Mahore and Louis Mkamsi, spotted paw prints in the dirt, they drove over every bush until they found the lions, asleep in the grass.

But the lodges themselves couldn't have been more different. Channeling the Neanderthals, Earth Lodge's 13 luxury suites were caves, richly decorated dugouts in the side of a hill, invisible from the top or sides. We sat in our plunge pool outside the front windows and watched the impala graze in complete privacy.

The lounges, tidy rock gardens, weathered tree trunks, bar, wine cellar and dining room echoed the motif, fresh and inviting but spartan. Even the dinner guests fit the mold, eating at the next table, alone and in silence.

In contrast, Bush Camp, with 25 luxury suites, popped with energy. Game drives mattered, but as part of the larger experience. The high school kids in short-shorts, celebrating a birthday, said it best. "First person to see a rhino gets the prize."

The food, served buffet style on a half-dozen tables heaped high, ran from meats, fish and pasta to salads, fruit, vegetables, breads and cookies, while the guests, sitting wherever there was space, mingled and exchanged names.

You could leave your kids in the Children's Center, tour Huntington Village or visit two nearby schools, both supported by the game lodges. Or you could meet village elder Nosiya Sabiya, a Shangaan shaman. Invited into her rondavel, I sat down, crossed my legs, she rolled the knucklebones and then she spoke, the words I'd hoped to hear: "We will meet again some time."

THE NITTY GRITTY:

PLANNING: There are no African safaris that you can't afford. Tent camping and 35-person tours, favored by students and young couples, are cheap and fun. High-priced lodges cost more because they offer more, from personal airport transfers to private cabins, comfortable beds, meals, beverages, game drives, offsite tours and even laundry service.

GETTING THERE: For South African Airways' routes, flight times and special offers see www.flysaa.com. Visas to enter Zambia are sold at the Lusaka Airport; the \$50 visa is slightly more expensive but provides multiple entries.

STAYING: See the Bushcamp Company at www.bushcampcompany.com; the Sabi Sabi Bush Lodge at www.sabisabi.com; and the Islands of Siankaba at www.siankaba.net. These and similar safari lodge websites provide photos, maps and descriptions of lodging, meals, wildlife, game drives and climate. All-inclusive safari lodge rates per person, per night, range from \$570 to \$1,000 or more.

(Writer Anne Z. Cooke, who drives a 48-year old car, spends her extra cash traveling.)