

Zambia



# The *Legend* of Lady Liuwa

I sat bolt upright in bed – the alarm clock read 3am, as my sleep-drowsed brain abandoned dreamland and tried to figure out what was going on.

Article and Photography by Stephen Cunliffe





**T**he only sound to escape the darkness outside my tent came from the monotonous calling of raucous toads and the shrill whine of stridulating crickets. I sat dead still; fighting to control my breathing and straining to hear what had so unexpectedly roused me from my slumber. The distant whoop of a hyaena drifted on the breeze... but that was not it. The more I thought about it, the more certain I became that the sound of the spare bed sliding on my tent's concrete floor was what had woken me; but big heavy beds don't just slide across floors! I had been sound asleep in the comfort of one of Matamanene Camp's four en suite tents, situated deep inside Zambia's Liuwa Plain National Park, before my sudden awakening. Gradually I began to relax and convince myself that it was only a vivid dream. I slowly sank down into the warmth of my duvet and began to drift back into dreamland. I was on the verge of dozing off when a deep guttural purring resonated through

the tent. A second later the spare bed in my tent shifted noisily once again. There was no mistaking it this time. In an instant I knew... I was being honoured with a late-night visit from the legendary Lady Liuwa. The furniture creaked and groaned as she nuzzled up to the tent and 'affectionately' rubbed against the canvas, pushing the bed and a table a few inches across the floor in the process, before flopping down outside my mosquito gauze-covered window. All that separated us was a thin sheet of canvas and, as I lay in bed, I could clearly hear the unmistakable rapid inhalations and exhalations of her breathing as she rested barely a metre away. It was not terror that overcame me as I waited for sleep to slowly return, it was rather a feeling of tremendous privilege and honour to be graced with a visit from the queen of the beasts. At no stage did her behaviour display any aggression and I had the overwhelming feeling that she simply craved companionship. Lady Liuwa is as enormous and

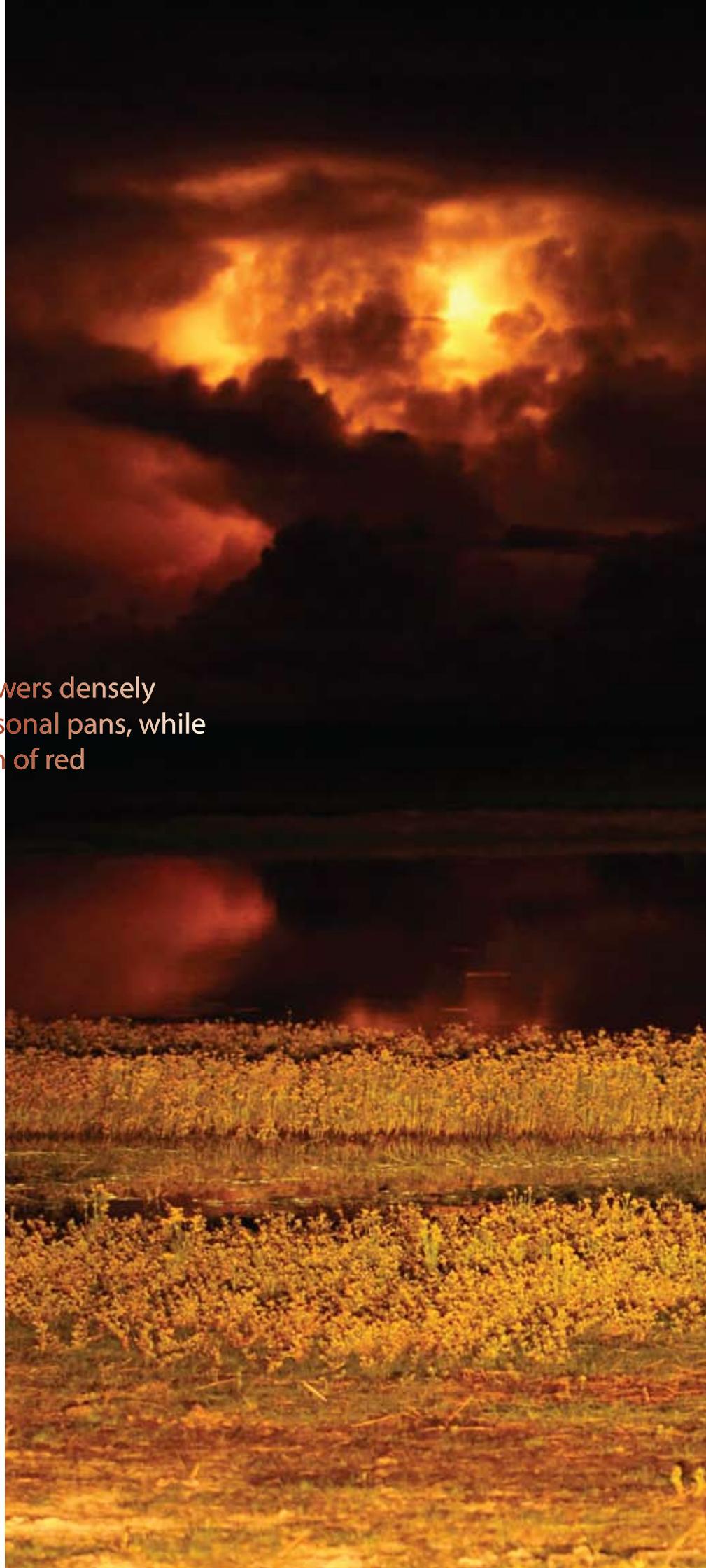
impressive a lioness as you are likely to find anywhere in Africa. (I hasten to add that she looks especially large in the dim glow of a paraffin lamp when she comes and rubs herself against the side of your canvas tent during the wee hours of the morning!) Sadly, she is also Liuwa's last surviving lion and this is believed to have contributed to her affiliation with Matamanene Camp. Various theories have been advanced as to why a wild lioness would choose to spend so much time, especially at night, within the confines of the camp. Some believe that she is lonely and, as a social cat, seeks companionship from the only available species that is too slow to flee from her instinctively. Others postulate that competitive pressure from the high density of spotted hyaenas on the plains has driven her to seek nocturnal refuge from their relentless persecution within the confines of the camp. Whatever the reason, she certainly provides a whole new dimension of adrenalin-pumping excitement to the

Liuwa safari experience.

Although there have been recent tantalising reports of lion activity on the outskirts of the reserve, the park management has prioritised the immediate reintroduction of lions to the Liuwa Plains to rectify the unnatural situation. The genetically closest feline relatives of Lady Liuwa have been traced to the Kafue National Park. The first reintroduction aims to bring a fine specimen of a male lion to provide some much-needed company for the queen of Liuwa. There is no denying that it will be a great day when lion prides once again strut across the open grasslands and restore a balance with the burgeoning hyaena population. The mere thought of their deep roars echoing across the open plains, as males proclaim their territories, is enough to make the hairs on the back of one's neck stand up.

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The Liuwa Plain National Park, located in the remote upper Zambezi floodplains of western Zambia's Barotseland, comprises gigantic grasslands fringed by *Burkea* woodland and interspersed with the occasional iconic palm or distinctive sausage tree. From November onwards the big blue skies fill with puffy-white cotton wool clouds, which steadily build into monstrous cumulo-nimbus thunderheads, before unleashing lightning and violent downpours upon the exposed plains. Experienced Liuwa veterans say that if you turn slowly, looking out over the never-ending savannas in every direction, you will usually be able to see all four seasons in 360 degrees. As the park becomes progressively marshier, huge numbers of flowers bloom, adding another dimension of scenic splendour to the vast savannas. Bright yellow *Conyza* flowers densely carpet the fringes of seasonal pans, while fireball lilies give a splash of red, and spider lilies add a dash of mauve and white to complete a vibrant landscape. The rainy season sees the inundated plains fill with huge flocks of wattled and crowned cranes;





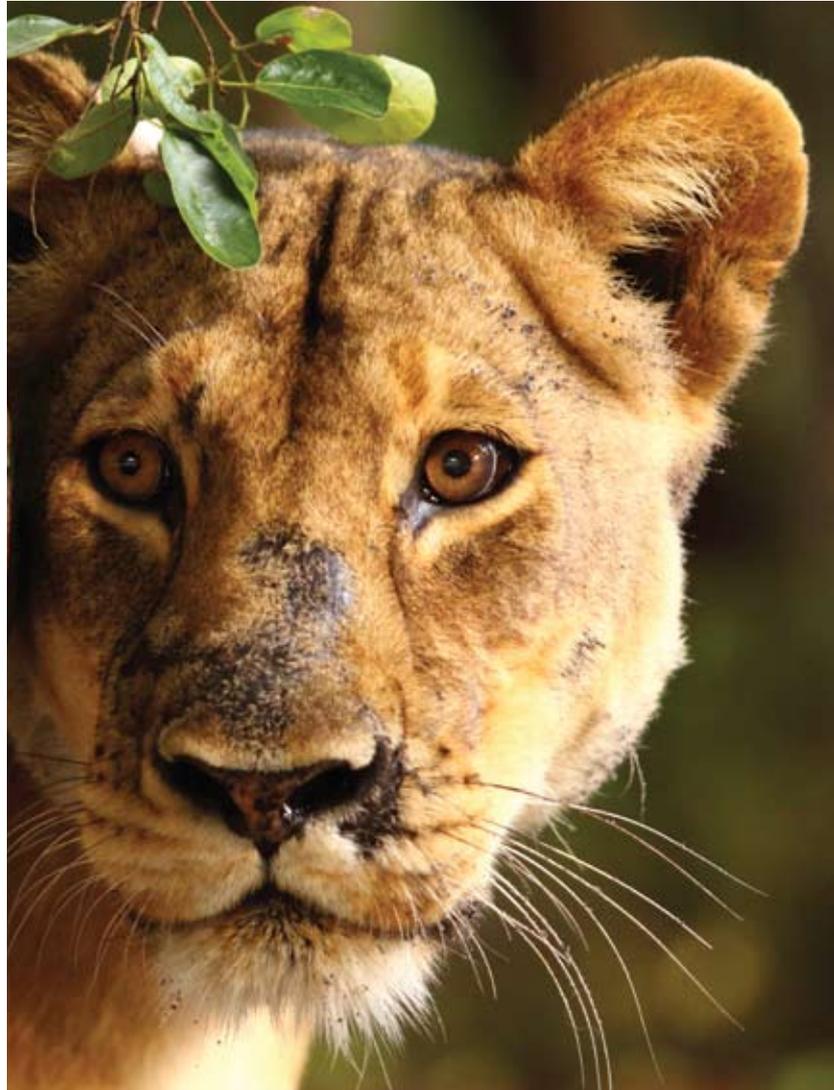
however, it is probably best known as the home of Africa's second largest wildebeest migration. Historically, the wildebeest population numbered in the hundreds of thousands and these huge numbers drove a migration from eastern Angola across the Liuwa Plain grasslands and into the woodlands before returning to Angola. Heavy poaching drastically reduced the wildebeest numbers to a low of 14,000 when African Parks Network (APN) took over the management of Liuwa in 2003. In the last five years the wildebeest population has displayed a remarkable

recovery to reach an estimated 40,000 animals by the end of 2008, and the spring gathering on the plains is once again starting to display a definite seasonal movement. Craig Reid, project manager for APN's Liuwa operations, believes "wildebeest movements will revert to their full extent as the numbers of wildebeest and zebra expand and natural resource pressures once again drive the migration". Liuwa offers considerably more than an abundance of blue wildebeest and plentiful herds of Burchell's zebra. The park is also home to

red lechwe, tsessebe, diminutive oribi, solitary steenbok and common duiker. Species diversity was given a boost with the recent reintroduction of eland and a small breeding herd of buffalo. Future plans include augmenting the existing buffalo population, bringing back the locally extinct Lichtenstein's hartebeest and assisting the endangered roan antelope to re-establish itself. There are very pleasing signs, such as a herd of twenty roan moving back into the park of their own accord, which reveal that Liuwa is recovering rapidly and once again becoming a



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fully-functional, healthy ecosystem. Lady Liuwa and her eternal enemy, the spotted hyaena, are not the only predators to inhabit the reserve. A pack of ten wild dogs have recently been frequenting the park's southern woodlands; while two female cheetah (both with cubs) have taken up residence further north in the park. During 2008 a paltry 358 people embraced the challenge, braved the poor roads and ventured into the remote Liuwa Plain National Park. I was fortunate to be one of the lucky few that accompanied the knowledgeable and highly respected

Zambian guiding legend, Robin Pope, on his first safari back to Liuwa in 12 years. The great news for prospective visitors is that the return of Robin Pope Safaris (RPS) to Liuwa means that there is once again an experienced and professional operator offering regular safaris to Liuwa during the peak migration season (December) and prime bird-watching months (May/June). The sense of endless open space that appears to stretch forever, in all directions, creates powerful emotions in visitors. Liuwa is a place of enormous skies, spectacular storms, dazzling stars and

deafening silence. With wildebeest and zebra scattered as far as the eye can see, the only sound that may intrude upon your solitude is the monotonous slosh of wildebeest hooves crossing shallow wetlands. Liuwa is unique: a truly wild and spectacular wilderness area that is best described as a cross between Kenya's Massai-Mara, Tanzania's Serengeti and Botswana's Okavango Delta; however, most importantly, it is devoid of crowds – making sure that there will be nobody else to distract the regal Lady Liuwa from paying a late night visit to your tent. 🐾



### LIUWA FACT FILE:

**Official name:** Liuwa Plain National Park

**Park headquarters and administrative centre:** Kalabo

**Size of park:** A total of 3,660 km<sup>2</sup> of undiscovered, wildlife-rich wilderness.

**Situation:** Liuwa lies in Barotseland on the western side of Zambia near the border with Angola. The park is bounded to the northeast by the Luambimba River and to the south by the Luanginga River; these rivers merge before flowing east into the Zambezi River.

**How to get there:** The recommended route leaves the tar road at Mongu to cross the Zambezi floodplain on a rutted dirt track to Kalabo – the last 20 kilometres are tarred – thereafter many sandy tracks wind north into the Park. This route closes during the wet season (December to mid-June) when the Lului pontoon ferry moves downstream.

**Where to stay:** Matamanene Camp is a tented, self-catering camp offering four permanent en suite safari tents. Located in the heart of Liuwa and administered by APN, it is also the base camp for RPS during their 3-month safari season. Overlanders and self-drive visitors can make use of four well-maintained community campsites – Lyangu, Kwale, Katoyana and Sikale – within the park. Campsites offer only basic facilities, including fresh-water wells, showers, toilets and fireplaces.

**Park fees:** Park entry fees for international visitors are US\$ 40.00 per person per day and community campsites are US\$10.00 per person per night.

**Climate and best time to visit:** Extensive flooding of the plains results in the park closing to all self-drive vehicles between 1 December and 15 July. The park is at its driest during September and October when wildebeest begin to mass on the plains; however, it is scenically most spectacular after the first rains in November.

**Health and safety concerns:** Barotseland is a largely safe part of Zambia where incidents of violent crime are infrequent but be aware of petty crime in the surrounding towns and villages. Western Zambia is a malaria area: consult your local doctor or travel clinic regarding health precautions, malaria prophylactics and immunizations.

**Travel tips:** Most supplies and fuel (jerry cans are essential) must be purchased before departing Mongu, although some basic goods can be acquired in Kalabo. Nothing (except firewood and curios) is available within the national park.

**Interesting fact:** Liuwa has long been regarded as a special place. The Litunga, the traditional king of Barotseland, declared it a 'game reserve' as early as the 19th century. Traditionally, the plains were the Litunga's private hunting ground, and the villagers were charged with looking after the animals for him until its official proclamation as a national park in 1972.

**Zambian monetary unit:** The Kwacha (ZAR 1.00 = ZMK 550.00)

**Further information and tourist facilities:** Visit [www.african-parks.org](http://www.african-parks.org) or [www.robinpopesafaris.net](http://www.robinpopesafaris.net) and follow the links for Liuwa Plain National Park.

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