

Liuwa Plain is a remote, little-visited corner of Zambia that is reputedly home to one of Africa's greatest animal gatherings. Accessible by vehicle only during the dry season, the overland route into Liuwa is nothing short of brutal.

Coming from the south, you endure a spine-crunching approach along the poorly maintained Sesheke-Senanga-Mongu road. A full day of hard driving will undoubtedly be required to get you through to Mongu, where fuel and supplies can be replenished. After departing "civilisation" at Mongu, the track across the Zambezi floodplain will provide still more challenging driving conditions.

Take your time getting through to Kalabo, enjoy getting dirty, have some fun and revel in the trials of a genuine off-road experience. Dark black cotton soils alternate with fine alluvial river sand and both have a tendency to thwart forward progress! But the tough approach is well worth the rewards on offer in one of Africa's finest wilderness areas.

On my very first night in nature's paradise,

I was privileged to witness first hand some of Liuwa's magic...

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. The 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 hyena 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 Matamanene Camp, located deep inside Zambia's Liuwa Plain National Park, before my inexplicable and 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 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.

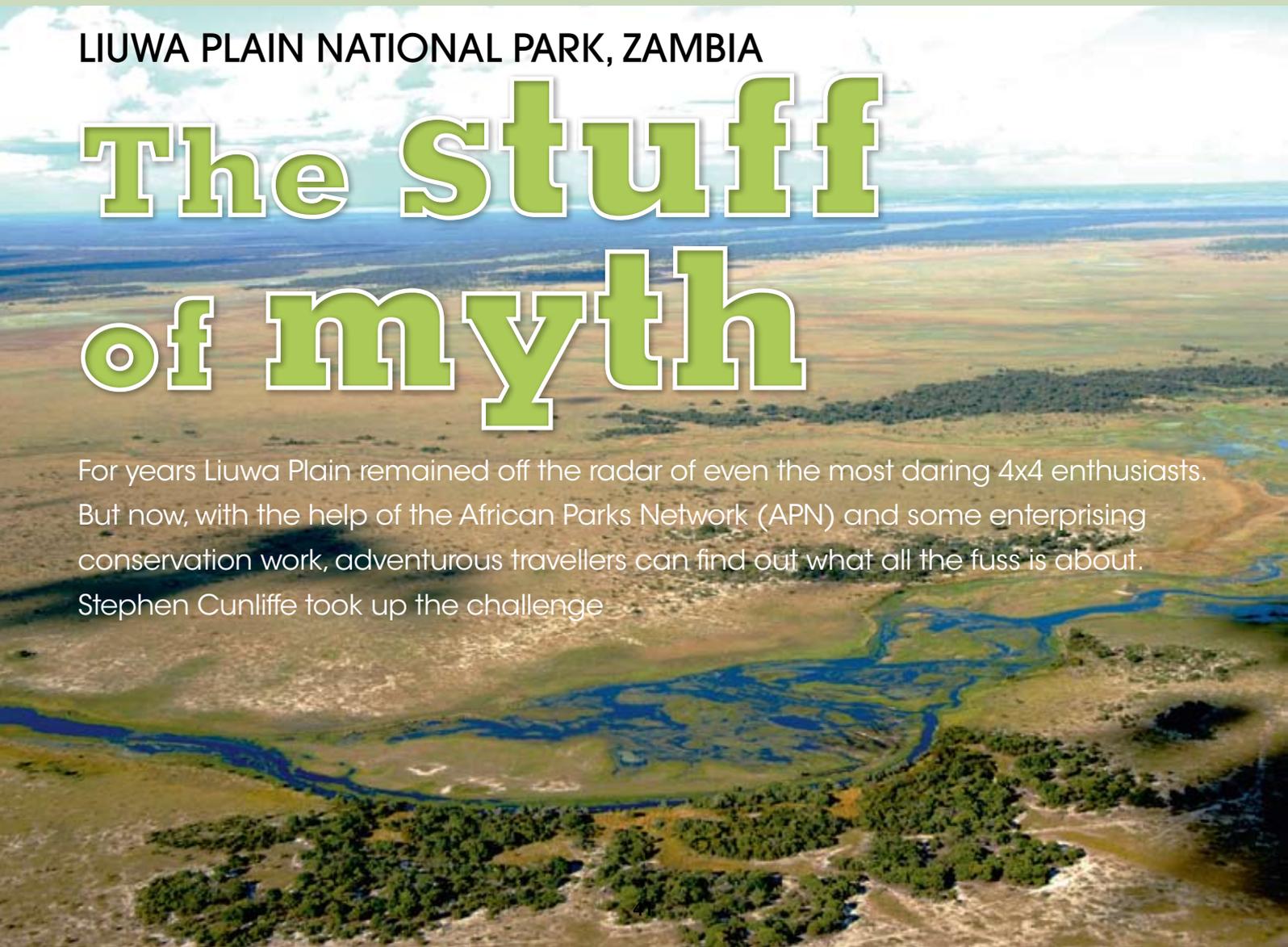
It was not terror that overcame me as I waited for sleep to slowly return, it was rather a feeling of tremendous privilege and honour that I had been graced with a visit from the queen of the beasts. At no stage did her behaviour display any aggression and I had the overwhelming feeling that she simply craved companionship.

Lady Liuwa is as enormous and impressive

LIUWA PLAIN NATIONAL PARK, ZAMBIA

The stuff of myth

For years Liuwa Plain remained off the radar of even the most daring 4x4 enthusiasts. But now, with the help of the African Parks Network (APN) and some enterprising conservation work, adventurous travellers can find out what all the fuss is about. Stephen Cunliffe took up the challenge



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 hyenas 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 hyena 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.

The Liuwa Plain National Park, located in the remote upper Zambezi floodplains of western Zambia's Barotseland, comprises of 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.

With the rain comes mud and with the mud comes the chance to revel in fantastic off-road

driving conditions.

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.

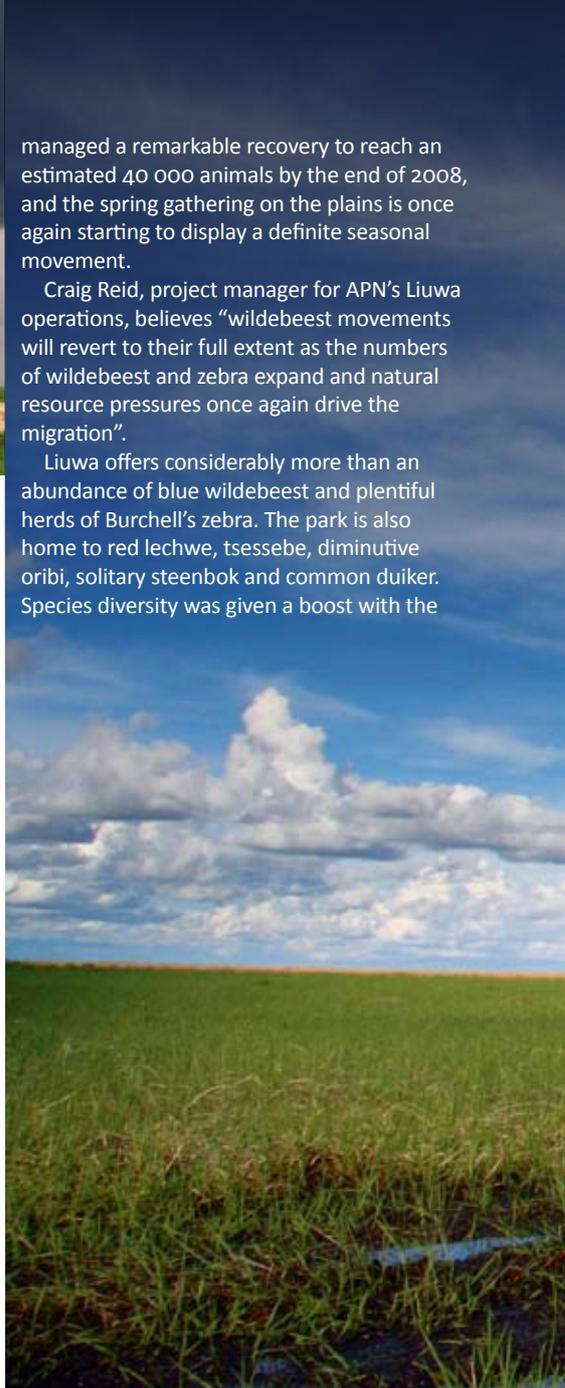
The rainy season sees the inundated plains fill with huge flocks of wattled and crowned cranes; however, it is probably best known as the home of Africa's second largest wildebeest migration. Historically, the wildebeest population numbered in the hundreds of thousands and these huge numbers drove a 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 the African Parks Network (APN) took over the management of Liuwa in 2003. In the last five years the wildebeest population has

managed 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 and recent sightings of a group of bull elephants once again frequenting the park, which reveal that Liuwa is recovering rapidly and once again becoming a fully functional, healthy ecosystem.

Lady Liuwa and her eternal enemy, the spotted hyena, are not the only predators to inhabit the reserve: A pack of ten wild dogs have recently moved back into the park's

southern woodlands, while two female cheetah (both with cubs) have taken up residence farther north in the park.

During 2008 a paltry 358 people embraced the challenge, braved the poor roads and ventured into the wilds of Liuwa Plain National Park. I was fortunate to be one of the lucky few. The knowledgeable and highly respected Zambian guiding legend, Robin Pope, showed me around on his first visit back to Liuwa in many years.

We ventured into Liuwa during the peak migration season (late November and early December) but many other Liuwa aficionados regard the wetter months immediately after the rains as Liuwa's "prime time".

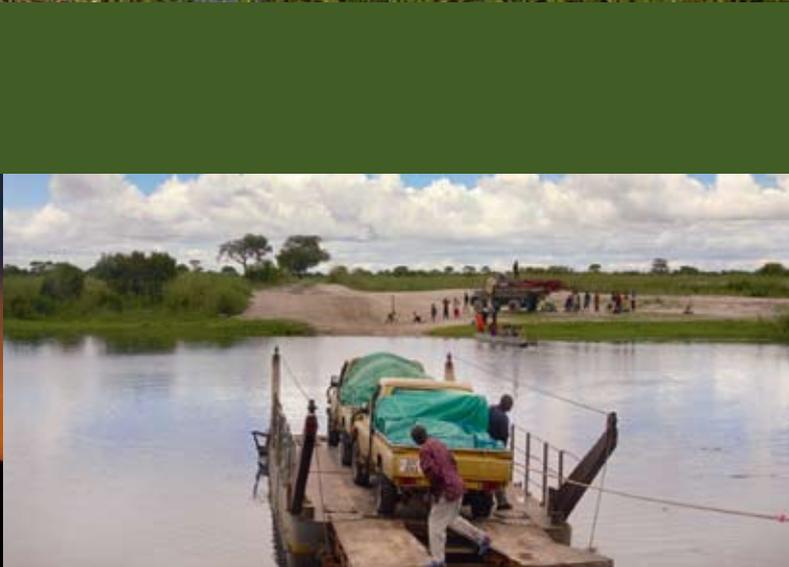
The flooded plains certainly do provide

an enviable combination of challenging 4x4 conditions along with stunning scenery and exceptional birding.

Due to the open and largely featureless nature of the plains, it's easy to get disorientated and lost. It is advisable to collect a Zambian Wildlife Authority (ZAWA) scout in Kalabo before you enter the park. He will ensure your safety and guide you around the reserve while sharing a wealth of local knowledge.

A GPS also comes in very handy allowing you to waypoint hyena dens and other fascinating findings on the seemingly indistinctive plains, which fade into the horizon in every direction.

If you decide to take on Liuwa in the fringe



THE LIUWA LOW-DOWN:

Park headquarters and administrative centre:
Kalabo

SIZE OF PARK

A total of 3660 square km 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 traverse the Zambezi floodplain on a rutted dirt track to Kalabo – the last 20km 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.

Highly adventurous 4x4 enthusiasts can attempt an alternative route (dry season only) by departing the park in a north-easterly direction. There are no roads and you will have to drive cross-country towards either the Lukulu or Limalunga pontoon where you can cross the Zambezi and rejoin something resembling a road! Enquire locally (before you set off) to find out whether the pontoons are operating and don't underestimate the enormity of undertaking this challenging route.

WHERE TO STAY

Matamanene Camp, located in the heart of Liuwa and administered by APN, is the base camp for Robin Pope Safaris (RPS) during their three-month safari season. It is a tented, self-catering camp offering four permanent en suite safari tents. 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 per person per day and community campsites are US\$10 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 immunisations.

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 FACTS

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

Visit www.african-parks.org or www.robinpopesafaris.net and follow the links for Liuwa Plain National Park to obtain up-to-date info on the park and its tourist facilities. For campsite bookings, please contact: liuwa@africanparks.co.zm.

season when the park is open and the plains are wet, then be prepared to get stuck. We spent a good few hours digging and winching to extricate our vehicles from the mud.

Even if you have a winch and a healthy dose of adventurous spirit, travelling alone is not recommended, as there is seldom even a tree or termite mound to winch off.

Liuwa is a place that deserves our respect. The lucky few who undertake and overcome the ordeal of getting there will enjoy, arguably, southern Africa's greatest wildlife and off-road destination.

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 remote and spectacular wilderness that resembles a cross between Kenya's Masai-Mara and Botswana's Okavango Delta. And, best of all, it is devoid of crowds: there will be no intrusions upon your once-in-a-lifetime safari experience – except perhaps a lonely lioness in need of a little company.

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The nüvi 500 is a multi-purpose GPS device dedicated to walking, cycling, driving, and boating in a single unit. It features Bluechart (ocean) mapping, street maps, and digital elevation mapping, as well as routable roads and tracks for 55 game reserves and parks in South Africa, Botswana, Zambia and Malawi. It is waterproof, flexible, and intuitive, making it the perfect tool for outdoorsmen living in the city or hiking in the veld.

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