



The Plain Truth

Liuwa Plain is the stuff of myth: a remote, little-visited corner of Zambia that is reputedly home to one of Africa's greatest animal gatherings. For years it was off the safari map. But now, with the help of some enterprising conservationists and operators, adventurous travellers can find out what all the fuss is about. **Stephen Cunliffe** took up the challenge.



Above: Blue wildebeest in Liuwa are once again beginning to migrate as their numbers continue to recover. Meanwhile oribi (*inset*) continue to thrive on the open grasslands.

I sat bolt upright in bed. The alarm clock read 3am as my drowsy brain abandoned dreamland and tried to figure out what was going on. Seconds earlier I had been asleep in the comfort of my tent. I was sure that the sound of the spare bed sliding across the floor had woken me – but can heavy beds really slide across floors? A deep, guttural purring resonated through the tent as the bed shifted again. In an instant I knew: I was being honoured with a late-night visit from the legendary Lady Liuwa.

Lady Liuwa is as enormous a lioness as you are likely to find anywhere in Zambia. (And she looks especially impressive in the dim glow of a paraffin lamp as she rubs against the side of your tent during the small hours.) She is also, sadly, the last surviving lion of Liuwa Plain National Park, and has a particular affiliation with Matamanene Camp,

where – in one of the camp's four en suite tents – I had just been so rudely awakened.

There are various theories about why a wild lioness would choose to spend so much time, especially at night, around people. Some suggest that she is lonely and, as a social cat, seeks companionship from one of the few species that does not automatically flee from her. Others believe that competitive pressure from the high density of spotted hyenas on the plains has driven her to seek refuge within the confines of the camp. Whatever the reason, she certainly adds a frisson to the Liuwa safari experience.

Liuwa Plain National Park, located in the remote upper Zambezi floodplains of western Zambia's Barotseland, protects 3,600 km² of remote, wildlife-rich wilderness. The park is sandwiched between the Luambimba River to the north and the Luanginga River to

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the south, while Angola lies on its western boundary and the Zambezi itself flows not far to the east. The vast, panoramic grasslands are fringed by *Burkea* woodland and punctuated with the odd iconic palm or sausage tree. It is a place of enormous skies, spectacular storms, stunning stars and a deafening silence – broken only by the monotonous slosh of wildebeest hooves crossing shallow wetlands or, occasionally, the crack of thunder.

From November onwards the big blue skies fill with cotton-wool clouds, which steadily build into monstrous cumulonimbus thunderheads before unleashing lightning and violent downpours upon the exposed plains. As the terrain becomes progressively marshier, countless blooms turn the savannahs into a landscape of vibrant colour: yellow *Conyza* flowers carpet the fringes of seasonal pans,

while fireball and spider lilies add their splashes of red, mauve and white. Meanwhile the inundated plains fill with huge flocks of wattled and crowned cranes, along with abundant storks, ducks, pelicans and other water birds – including such rarities as the slaty egret.

Despite this rich avian and floral spectacle, however, Liuwa Plain is probably best known as the setting of Africa's second biggest blue wildebeest migration. These lugubrious antelope once traversed the terrain in their hundreds of thousands, moving from eastern Angola onto Liuwa's grasslands and through its woodlands before returning to Angola. Heavy poaching had reduced the population to a low of 14,000 by the time African Parks Network (APN) took over management of the park in 2003. But the last five years have seen a remarkable recovery, with the population reaching an estimated >>>

*Below: A palmnut vulture
poses on top of a palm.*

PHOTO CREDIT



Zambia undiscovered



Above: Lady Liuwa continues her lonely vigil, often entering Matamanene camp (*inset*) in search of company.

Opposite page: The rainy season carpets the grasslands with flowers, such as these spider lilies, while crowned cranes (*inset*) are among countless birds that flock to the wetlands and Burchell's zebra (*below*) enjoy the rich grazing.

Below: The park's numerous spotted hyena are unusually approachable and allow for outstanding photographic opportunities.

40,000 by the end of 2008, and the spring gathering is once again starting to show definite seasonal movement. "Wildebeest movements will revert to their full extent," explains Craig Reid, project manager for APN, "as the numbers of wildebeest and zebra expand and pressure on natural resources drives the migration."

But Liuwa offers considerably more than just lots of wildebeest and zebra. We found red lechwe congregating around the natural pans on the floodplains and herds of tsessebe on the western plains. Diminutive oribi and steenbok sought shelter in grass tussocks on the open plains, while common duiker dashed for cover in the woodland. Eland, recently reintroduced, have grown in number to 56 and taken up residence on the park's eastern boundary. Meanwhile the eight-hectare reintroduction boma currently houses a small breeding herd of buffalo, and

there are plans to build up this population, before also bringing back locally-extinct Lichtenstein's hartebeest and roan antelope.

Another exciting plan for 2009 involves the relocation of a male lion from Kafue National Park to provide Lady Liuwa with some much-needed company. Otherwise, with the exception of leopard, it appears that most predator populations are healthy or recovering naturally. We saw plentiful side-striped jackal, usually trotting past in pairs, while the den sites of the numerous spotted hyena clans were easy to locate on the open plains, allowing superb viewing of cubs and social interactions. A pack of ten wild dogs is often sighted on the edge of the southern woodlands, while two female cheetahs (both with cubs) have recently taken up residence further north.

During 2008 a paltry 358 people embraced





the challenge of Liuwa, braving the poor roads to venture into the Park. I was one of the lucky few who accompanied the 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 to Liuwa means that an experienced and professional operator is once again offering regular safaris during both the peak migration season (December) and prime bird-watching months (May/June).

Liuwa is unique: a truly remote and spectacular wilderness that resembles a cross between Tanzania's Serengeti 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. ■



LIUWA LOW-DOWN

When to visit: The park is at its driest during September and October, when wildebeest begin to mass on the plains. It is scenically most spectacular after the first rains in November. Extensive flooding means it is closed to self-drive vehicles from 1 December–15 July.

Getting there: The recommended route leaves the tar road at Mongu to cross the Zambezi floodplain on a rutted dirt track to Kalabo (the last 20km are tarred), where many sandy tracks wind north into the Park. This route closes during the wet season (December to mid-June) when the Lului Pontoon moves downstream.

Where to stay: Matamanene Camp is a tented, self-catering camp at the heart of Liuwa, with four permanent en suite safari tents. It is administered by APN and is the base camp for RPS. Overlanders and self-drive visitors can use four well-maintained community campsites, which have fresh-water wells, showers, toilets and fireplaces.

Park fees: US\$ 40.00 per person per day.

Fuel and supplies: Jerry cans are essential. Most supplies and fuel must be purchased before departing Mongu, although some basic goods can be acquired in Kalabo. Nothing is available within the park.

Health and safety: Liuwa Plain is a malaria area, so the usual precautions apply. Consult your doctor.

Find out more: www.african-parks.org or www.robinpopesafaris.net (follow the links for Liuwa Plain National Park).

