

An aerial photograph of a vast herd of lechwe, a type of antelope, wading through a dark, swampy landscape. The animals are illuminated by the warm, golden light of a setting or rising sun, creating a striking contrast against the dark water and sky. The herd is spread out across the frame, with some animals in the foreground and others receding into the distance. The sky is filled with soft, wispy clouds, and the overall atmosphere is serene and majestic.

WHERE THE WATER MEETS THE SKY

THE WILDERNESS THAT WAS THE FINAL RESTING PLACE OF EXPLORER DAVID LIVINGSTONE – WHO DIED IN CHIEF CHITAMBO'S LAKESHORE VILLAGE IN 1873 – IS ALSO HOME TO A GIANT, BIZARRE-LOOKING, RARELY SEEN BIRD AND GREAT HERDS OF LECHWE. YET FEW PEOPLE OUTSIDE OF ZAMBIA HAVE HEARD OF THE BANGWEULU SWAMPS, SAYS STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

I opened the passenger door, stepped into the knee-deep water and immediately sank down to my ankles in the mud below. With a relentless African sun drumming down on the exposed plains, the combination of cool mud and refreshing water felt heavenly.

As I sloshed and squelched my way around the vehicle, I assessed our predicament: one doesn't need to be a 4x4 expert to realise we were properly stuck. The sucking black mud had swallowed our Landcruiser right down to its axles and the car didn't look like it would be going anywhere in a hurry. We had a winch, but the nearest tree shimmered on the sun-baked horizon over a kilometre away; it was time to get dirty and start digging.

As we worked on the immobile vehicle, countless black lechwe kept an inquisitive eye on proceedings. The lechwe, endemic to the wetlands of northern Zambia, were one of the primary reasons for my visit. From a wildlife point of view, we could not have chosen a better place to get bogged down. We were right in the centre of the game-rich Chimbwe Plains in the Chikuni sector of Bangweulu: the proverbial land of plenty. It was an overwhelmingly peaceful setting with only the sound of digging and the reassuring low hum of the lechwe herds to break the deafening silence of the wide-open plains.

While a couple of our team stayed behind to work on extricating the hapless vehicle, the rest of us decided to jump ship and tackle the remaining two kilometres of our journey on foot under the watchful eye of Simon Ng'ona, our *Zambian Wildlife Authority (ZAWA)* guide. En route to Chikuni, thousands of beady eyes monitored our laboured progress across the waterlogged floodplain.

We plunged knee-deep through water, sinking deeper still in the dark mud below. The going was slow, but the mesmerising scenery buoyed our spirits and we marvelled at the sheer number of antelope in every direction to the treeless horizon. We were wading through the middle of one of Africa's most impressive – but least known – wildlife gatherings.

The lechwe-dominated floodplains, where we now stood, are part of an extensive system of lakes, shallow swamplands and seasonally flooded grasslands – fed by the Chambeshi River – that collectively form the 10 000km² Bangweulu Wetlands. From April onwards, as fresh green grass sprouts in the wake of the receding floodwaters, herds of handsome lechwe congregate on the plains in their tens of thousands to take advantage of the lush grazing on offer – a truly grand wildlife spectacle. And while poaching in recent decades may have reduced the population from a reputed 250 000 in the 1930s, the sheer scale of the gathering is still astounding.

Sixty thousand lechwe are certainly not the only reason to venture north and explore Zambia's version of the Okavango Delta. The seasonal swamps, grasslands and termitaria woodlands of this remote wilderness also support decent numbers of tsessebe, sitatunga, southern reedbuck, oribi and zebra, along with smaller herds of buffalo and elephant. Our forays across the plains and into the wetlands produced good sightings of all these herbivores, while spotted hyena were often seen skulking around the campsites at night.



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For many visitors, however, Bangweulu's mammals – even the incredible concentrations of lechwe – play second fiddle to its astonishing birdlife. Flocks of wattled cranes (10 percent of Africa's total population reside here) stalk the plains, along with their retinue of egrets and African spoonbills, while deeper into the swamps we added memorable sightings of African purple swamphen, lesser jacana and white-cheeked bee-eater to our burgeoning bird list.

One bird holds a particularly powerful allure for visitors. The peculiar-looking shoebill, resembling a cross between a stork and a pelican with an enormous fish-catching beak, is arguably the most sought-after on the African continent. This obscure bird became my obsession as our Bangweulu adventure unfolded – especially as this is the only place in southern Africa one is likely to see it. And yet, after days of fruitless searching in the swamps, I had begun to fear the worst.

Simon remained upbeat, however, insisting he knew just the man to help us out. The following morning he proudly reappeared poling a small *pirogue* (banana boat) with local bird guide Patson Mukosa in tow. If there was a shoebill in the area, Simon assured me, Patson would know where to find it. I hopped in the little boat and we immediately set off ►



‘For two hours we edged slowly forward until we eventually sat barely 20 metres from this extraordinary creature’

in search of the favoured feeding sites of our elusive quarry deep within the permanent swamp.

Finding the wily old shoebill proved considerably more challenging than anyone had anticipated. As the day wore on and the heat steadily sapped my energy and enthusiasm, Patson remained resolute. After seven long hours, and without the aid of binoculars, the elated guide suddenly pointed ahead and exclaimed: ‘Shoebill!’

And there it was: a huge grey bird with a great boot of a bill standing stock-still in the shallows. We approached cautiously. The bird stood frozen, staring intently into the water for what seemed an eternity, before its head suddenly darted forward to ambush the unsuspecting prey. Seconds later the bird reappeared clutching a large catfish in its enormous clog-shaped bill. With a quick gulp and toss of the head, down went the prize – whole.

For two hours we edged slowly forward until we eventually sat barely 20 metres from this extraordinary creature. It was a magical experience and we only tore ourselves away when, after briefly displaying its impressive 2.5-metre wingspan, the bird relocated to a nearby tree to digest its lunch. ‘I told you I know these swamps,’ proclaimed Patson. ‘I wanted to find you a shoebill and I did. Thank you very much!’

Back at Chikuni after our successful excursion, I caught up with Ian Stevenson, the man tasked with putting Bangweulu back on the map. The African Parks Network (APN) project director had kindly agreed to show me around for the afternoon. He gunned the engine and as we churned our way across the flooded grasslands, he filled me in on this neglected chunk of wild Africa.

Bangweulu was declared a Game Management Area way back in 1972, but soon slipped off Zambia’s tourist circuit due to a lack of funding, development and technical expertise. Things changed in 2008 when APN was invited by the local community and ZAWA to help the wetlands realise their huge tourism potential.

‘The project has a 20-year lifespan,’ explained Ian, ‘and our aim is to create the capacity for local people to manage their own natural heritage during this time frame.’ It’s a far-reaching vision that will benefit people

and wildlife alike. ‘Ultimately,’ he added, ‘we’re striving to foster a favourable environment in which the community will want to protect and preserve Bangweulu.’

As we discussed the future of this unique area, we drove past a group of fishermen and their families pushing heavily laden bicycles through the shallow water en route to a distant village. I had heard persistent rumours that some locals, members of a 90 000-strong community of subsistence fisherman scattered across the seasonal islands of the massive swamp, felt threatened by the arrival of African Parks and the establishment of the new park.

‘Our greatest challenge is to win the support of local communities,’ agreed Ian, explaining how the fishermen, especially, are concerned about the introduction of sustainable fishing practices. ‘But the community stands to reap significant long-term benefits from tourism development and the revenue it will produce.’

Other exciting developments loom on the wildlife front, including an ambitious plan to release cheetah back onto the floodplains. ‘We want to restore the area’s original fauna and flora,’ confirmed Ian. A temporary 20 000-hectare sanctuary being constructed this year will also allow the translocation of additional elephant, roan, sable and waterbuck to augment the remnant populations of these species within the project area. Locally extinct predators such as leopards and wild dogs will follow, with the ultimate ambition being the return of lions and black rhinos within the next five years.

An afternoon in the company of the indefatigable Ian proved a fitting finale to a highly entertaining and rewarding adventure exploring a rare and unique wilderness. Although the area still has some way to go in developing its full wildlife and tourism potential, there’s no doubt Bangweulu has all the right ingredients to become Zambia’s Okavango Delta in the years ahead.

Meanwhile, if one has a yearning for the untamed and unexplored, and aren’t put off by getting a little dirty, then Bangweulu offers a veritable playground for the adventurous nature lover. The low hum of grazing lechwe and the deafening silence of the wide-open plains await. ●

TRAVEL NOTES BANGWEULU, ZAMBIA

🌟 **BEST TIME TO GO** From May to August the Chimbwe Plains are dry enough to be driven on but sufficiently green to attract huge concentrations of black lechwe. The plains remain accessible until December, but from January to April heavy rains render roads impassable and the wetlands can only be accessed by boat.

VISA South Africans do not require a visa to enter Zambia. zambiapretoria.net

CURRENCY The Zambian kwacha. R1 = ZK688

HEALTH Precautions against malaria are necessary, as is a yellow fever vaccination.

SLEEP HERE The most upmarket option is Shoebill Island Camp (kasanka.com), offering safari tents and rustic reed-walled cottages with en-suite bathrooms. Fully inclusive packages are R2 500 pp per night; self-catering chalets from R350. Nakapalayo Tourism Project [[contact details???](#)] is an immaculate

community-run camp of six simple twin-bed brick chalets, with bucket showers and the village’s first flush toilets. R420 pp per night – includes dinner with traditional entertainment, breakfast and a guided village tour. Nsoke Community Campsite [[contact details???](#)] is a recently upgraded campsite on the edge of the game-rich Chimbwe Plains, with a freshwater borehole. Camping R70 pp. If you’re driving to Bangweulu, Lake Waka Waka Community Camp is a great place to break the journey. It has an idyllic location beside a lake that’s safe to swim in. Camping from R35 per person. **DO THIS** Experienced local guides conduct twice-daily wildlife-viewing and bird-watching activities. Visitors usually opt for being poled through the swamps on escorted pirogue trips, but walking safaris and game drives on the Chimbwe Plains should not be missed. For more info, see african-parks.org or mail the field

operations manager: kerrri@african-parks.org

📍 **GO THERE** British Airways flies to Livingstone from Johannesburg. From here, chartered flights via Lusaka (with Sky Trails or Proflight) go into the park. Alternatively, Bangweulu is an 8–10 hour drive from Lusaka along the paved Great North Road. ba.com

