

VALLEY SERVICE

In the south of Zambia, where the great Zambezi River slips out of the country and winds east toward the Indian Ocean, there lies a gem of a National Park. Once the domain of poachers, the last 20 years have seen a dramatic transformation in its fortunes, turning it into one of Africa's crown jewels. **Stephen Cunliffe**, a former safari guide in the park, explains just what makes the Lower Zambezi so special.

Lower Zambezi

Paddling back to Chongwe River
Camp after a day on the river



Sunset brings a last flurry of activity before carmine bee-eaters settle down for the night.

MARKERPRETZER

It was a tight squeeze, with six of us crouching together between two large spiny sickle bushes. Our escort officer sat at one end of the group, clutching his AK47 and watching the tail-end of a sixty-strong breeding herd of elephants disappearing into dense *Combretum* thickets to our west. I was keeping an eye on a splinter group, crossing the floodplain to our east, scarcely 20 metres away. The four intrepid tourists were following my instructions implicitly. Everybody sat dead still, in awe of the spectacle unfolding around us. We were enjoying that surge of adrenalin that accompanies any close encounter with elephants on foot. Hard to imagine, but things were about to get even more exciting: one relaxed elephant bull wandered up from the river and, oblivious to our presence, started to feed on one of our sickle bushes. Now we were truly in the thick of it. We held our breath as he crunched away.

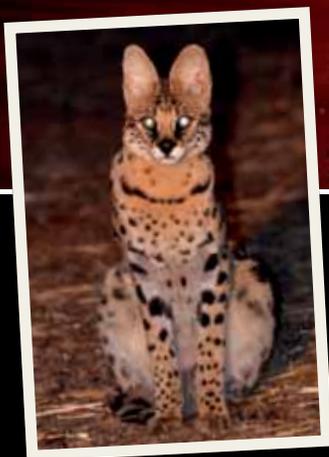
This may not have been your typical bush walk, but in September, at the height of the dry season, it is difficult to explore the park on foot without encountering a hundred elephants or more. The park in question is the 4,092-square-kilometre Lower Zambezi National Park (LZNP), located along Zambia's southeastern border with Zimbabwe. This wildlife paradise stretches between the perennial Chongwe River to the west and the Luangwa River confluence to the east, and lies in the shadow of the rugged 800-metre peaks of the Zambezi escarpment.

At the height of the dry season it is difficult to explore the park on foot without encountering a hundred elephants or more.

North of these hills the park extends still further – though few visitors realise it – towards the inaccessible and undeveloped north.

But the park's crowning glory is, of course, its southern boundary: the 120 kilometres of Zambezi River frontage. And across the river lies Zimbabwe's world-renowned Mana Pools National Park. Together, these two breathtaking parks form one of the most spectacular and diverse transfrontier wilderness areas on the continent. The Zambian side enjoys the bonus of a relatively narrow floodplain, which concentrates the wildlife and adds a spectacular mountainous backdrop to almost every sighting. The river itself is controlled by the Kariba Dam, and thus no longer experiences dramatic fluctuations or flooding. The old flood channels

STEPHEN CUMMINGS (2)



Left: The elegant serval prowls the valley floor after dark.

Below: Lions are perfectly competent, if reluctant, swimmers.



now fill with rainwater and form freshwater lagoons, known locally as 'dambos'. Apart from the river, the larger dambos are the only perennial water sources in the area and act as a magnet for animals during the dry season.

The park has a complex history. The area that it encompasses was traditionally home to thousands of indigenous people. During colonial times, however, the British administration evicted all people and livestock from the area in an attempt to control the spread of sleeping sickness and the livestock disease Nagana, both transmitted by tsetse flies. The last communities were removed from the present-day park in 1952 and amalgamated into the surrounding villages of the Goba people. After unsuccessful attempts to administer the region as a controlled hunting and NGO-administered conservation area, the government eventually proclaimed it a National Park in 1983. At that time there was little infrastructure, tourism was non-existent and the valley was the exclusive domain of poachers. Illegal hunting continued unchecked for another decade: elephants were ruthlessly slaughtered for their ivory and the black rhino was driven to extinction by the Yemeni-driven demand for its horn – a devastating loss to the Zambezi Valley, which, a mere 15 years earlier, had held Africa's highest density of this species.

Pioneering tourism development of the LZNP began in 1990. At this stage the park was estimated to be losing as many as 300 elephants to poachers per year. Predator populations had exploded due to the abundance of carcasses, with one local lion pride peaking at an astonishing 48 cats. But as tourism activities slowly expanded, with roads maintained and game drive loops opened, the improved accessibility allowed the Zambian Wildlife Authority (ZAWA) to become more involved in patrolling the area. At the same time concerned tourism operators and conservationists founded an NGO, Conservation Lower Zambezi (CLZ), to assist ZAWA with its anti-poaching operations. Animal populations recovered rapidly as the tourism sector expanded deeper into the park.

Thankfully the years of poaching caused no serious damage to the natural habitats. The park is characterised by miombo woodland to the north and dense mopane thickets along the eastern floodplain. Sausage trees, wild mangoes and huge baobabs, some older than a thousand years, dominate the riverbanks and valley floor, while along the river's edge the most abundant tree is the iconic winterthorn – also known as the *ana* tree, apple ring or *Albida* – whose nutritious pods during the dry winter months ❖❖

TIGER TALES



The serious teeth of a tiger fish are best kept at arm's length.

MARKER PEZZER

The tigerfish (*Hydrocynus forskali*) is common in the waters of the Lower Zambezi. This fierce predator, with its distinctive protruding teeth, is considered by many to be the best freshwater sport angling fish in the world, with the current record standing at 16.10kg. The greatest challenge is to catch a 'tiger', as they are known, using a fly rod. One technique is to float slowly with the current and cast into the swirling eddies formed downstream of natural obstructions, such as branches and sandbanks. The fish may take the fly so savagely that fingers are burnt as the line is torn from the reel, and puts up an acrobatic display in an attempt to shake free – often succeeding in doing so.

Most lodges along the river offer tiger fishing and cater for both serious anglers and first-timers. Standard tackle, including fly rods, is provided, though serious fly fishermen (and women) may wish to bring their own gear. Other fish on this stretch of the Zambezi include bream, *chessa* and *vundu* (*Heterobranchus longifilis*), a huge catfish that can exceed 40kg. Note that all reputable operators pursue a strict 'catch-and release' policy.



Sundowners on the Zambezi is a time-honoured ritual.

STEPHEN CUMMINGS

Lower Zambezi

And everyone, whether twitcher or not, is awed by colonies of hundreds of carmine bee-eaters tunnelling into the steep banks of the Zambezi.

Elephants are ubiquitous on the Lower Zambezi, whether browsing on the bank or swimming across the river, trunks aloft like snorkels.

are a staple food for elephants and other wildlife.

This rich flora supports a corresponding diversity of fauna, with more than 50 mammal and 400 bird species. Enthusiastic birders are attracted by frequent sightings of the pennant-winged nightjar, collared palm-thrush and Lillian's lovebird, with the biggest tick for twitchers being the Pel's fishing owl. And everyone, whether twitcher or not, is awed by colonies of hundreds of carmine bee-eaters tunnelling into the steep banks of the Zambezi.

Of course most visitors hope to spot the large predators, and with frequent sightings of lion, leopard and hyena, plus occasional wild dog, few go home disappointed. Smaller predators often seen include serval, civet, white-tailed mongoose and honey badger, while among a host of other nocturnal creatures there are occasional sightings of aardvark and even pangolin. Antelope include abundant herds of dainty impala, families of shaggy-coated waterbuck, regal kudu, shy bushbuck and nocturnal Sharpe's grysbok, while zebra, warthog and abundant hippo swell the ranks of the herbivores. But the park is perhaps most famous for its prolific elephant and buffalo herds along the river during the dry season: elephant gatherings may occasionally number up to 200.

Perhaps surprisingly, there is no evidence that wildebeest, cheetah or giraffe were ever found within the LZNP, with some suggestion

that the physical barrier of the escarpment may explain the absence of giraffes. The park remains perfect black rhino country, however, and the recent successful reintroduction of this species into North Luangwa National Park has led to plans for their imminent return to the LZNP.

The dry season is the best time to visit, with most camps operating between early April and mid-November. The coolest months are June and July, with October considered 'suicide month' as daily temperatures regularly climb above 40 degrees Celsius. A strict management plan has limited the number of safari operators within the park to six bush camps and luxury lodges, but more operators are located in the Chiawa game management area adjoining the park's western boundary, where they share the same basic habitat and wildlife – many offering excursions into the park. Whether inside or outside the park, the visitor has a wealth of activities to enjoy, including game drives (both day and night), catch-and-release fishing for the world-renowned tiger fish, sunset boat cruises to view elephants cavorting in the river, informative and exciting morning bush walks, and canoe safaris.

It is the last of these that offers perhaps the defining thrill of the Lower Zambezi. Whether you choose just to float downstream for an hour at sunset, or spend a full day exploring the river's smaller hippo-crowded channels, this is undoubtedly one of the greatest wildlife experiences on earth. During the dry season an endless procession of animals line the riverbanks and slake their thirst from the life-giving river. The canoes slip slowly and silently by and a feeling of total tranquility descends. You become a part of nature rather than an unwanted intruder.

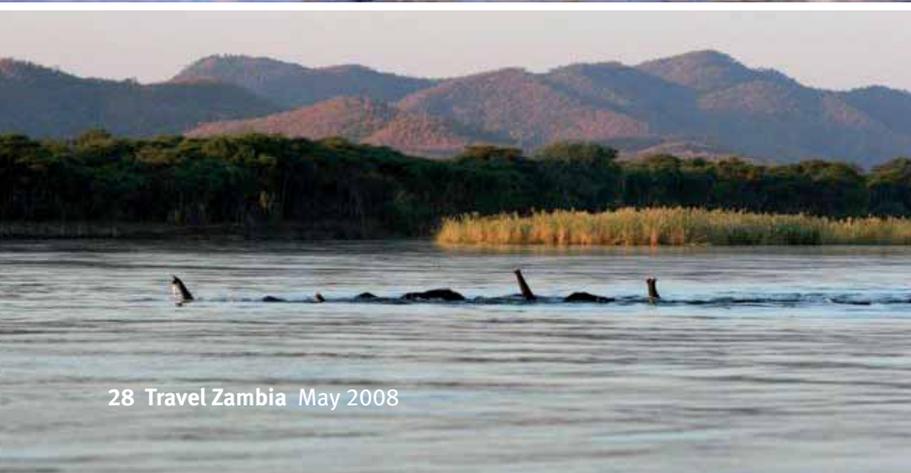
Sundowners are equally synonymous with Zambezi safari. You can alight from your open game-viewing vehicle, beach your canoe or simply cut the boat engine and float quietly downstream. As the sun sinks behind the escarpment, turning the views from golden to blood red, the hippos start grunting, a distant lion roars and your gin and tonic will never have tasted quite so delicious.

Visit at your peril, because most who set foot in the lower Zambezi quickly become addicted and return year after year.

Stephen Cunliffe, born in South Africa, spent two years as a licensed safari guide in Lower Zambezi National Park, based at Sausage Tree and Old Mondoro camps. In 2007 he was invited to join CLZ's board of examiners for safari guides. ■



MARIE PEITZER



STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

UP-CLOSE AND PERSONAL

The Lower Zambezi has become renowned for close encounters with wildlife. **Marek Petzer**, a photojournalist based in Lusaka, recalls how one such moment will stay with him.



An uninvited guest
CHONGWE RIVER CAMP

I've been fortunate enough to have visited the valley several times over the past decade, and each time I leave, my predominant emotion has been one of relief: relief that I am still alive. My memories are haunted by close encounters with animals that could do me serious damage. And, disturbingly, it's *inside* the impeccably appointed lodges that these encounters have been closest. You see, the permanent residents of the park don't let a minor thing such as a 12-bedded lodge get in the way of their 'survival of the fittest' lifestyle. Many is the time that lions or leopards have chased down their prey through camp, buffalo have ambushed me on the lawn, or – just as I'm nursing my much-needed drink at the bar – an elephant has wandered up to shake the very tree that it is built around. My bar! There it is hoovering up pods for lunch while the ice rattles uncontrollably in my glass. At least the camps provide escorts to and from your tents or chalets at night

– which is just as well, since that's when our friend the hippo, whose toothy grin accounts for more human fatalities than any other animal in Africa, moves in to mow the lawns.

One particular incident stands out in my memory. I was wandering back to the bar at Sausage Tree Camp after shooting some tent interiors when I pulled up short: a small herd of large elephants was heading the same way. I saw all the other guests gathered in the dining area. First thought: go to a tent. Second thought: hang on, there are great pictures to be had. Third thought: where can I hide? I made for some steps cut into the riverbank leading down to the boats and canoes. There I stood with just my head above the bank, waiting for the perfect shot.

That's when things went pear-shaped: one large bull, who must have noticed me going down the steps, strolled over to check things out. OK, where now? Crocodile-infested river behind me,

elephants in front. I went right down to the canoes, jumped into the first and stepped into the next until I was in the one furthest from the steps. But still I was feeling very exposed. The bank was about two metres high, so I reckoned the best thing would be to move to the front of the canoe and hug the bank – which I literally did. Over the din of my thudding heart I could hear the elephant snuffling a mere foot or so above my head. I froze. After a couple of days – or was it seconds – I heard a call from the dining area: "Marek, move to the right, there's a gully you can come up." Speed was essential: I sloshed through the mud, clambered up the gully and peered over the top. The elephants were still there, very close. "Wait," called Jason, the camp owner. But too late: I bolted for the dining room. Just made it. "Wondered if you were going to get out of that one," said a cheerful guest. Jason just shook his head.

Never did get that dining room shot. ■



Nature on the Lower Zambezi comes in many different guises, from the savagery of lions pulling down a kudu to the serenity of a morning spent drifting downstream.
BOTH PICTURES: STEPHEN CUNLIFFE

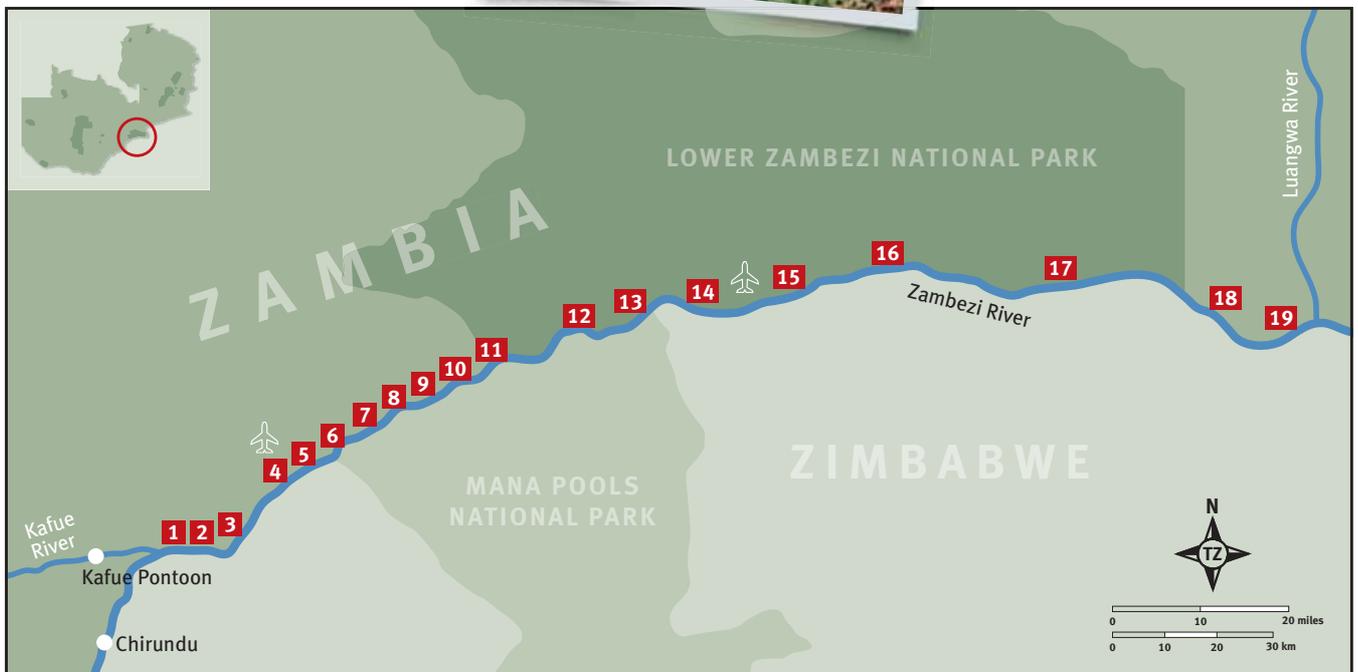
LOWER ZAMBEZI: Where to stay

There is a good choice of accommodation, from lodges to campsites, situated both inside the park and in the Chiawa Game Management Area (GMA) to the west. With advance booking and a 4WD, you can drive yourself into any of these, but most people arrange for a transfer by road or air.



Above: A lucky game drive may turn up wild dogs.
Left: A snoozing hippo acquires some passengers.

BOTH IMAGES STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



West of the National Park (in the Chiawa GMA)

- 1 **Kiambi Lower Zambezi** www.kiambi.co.za
- 2 **Kanyemba Lodge** www.kanyemba.com
- 3 **Wild Tracks Adventure Camp** info@wildtracks.info
- 4 **Kayila Lodge** www.safpar.com
- 5 **Nyati River Lodge** 2RZWILD2bushmail.net
- 6 **Mvuu Lodge** www.mvuulodge.com
- 7 **Sobek Canoe Adventures** www.zambezi.co.uk
- 8 **Baines River Camp** www.bainesrivercamp.com
- 9 **Kasaka River Lodge** www.kasakariverlodge.com
- 10 **Royal Zambezi Lodge** www.royalzambezi.com
- 11 **Chongwe River Camp** www.chongwe.com

Within the National Park

- 12 **Chiawa Camp** www.chiawa.com
- 13 **Sausage Tree** www.sausagetreecamp.com
- 14 **Mwambashi River Lodge** www.royalzambezi.com www.safpar.com
(sister camp to Kayila Lodge)
- 15 **Old Mondoro** see Chiawa or Sausage Tree (above)
- 16 **Kulefu Camp** www.sanctuarylodges.com/kulefu.htm
- 17 **Ana Tree Lodge** www.anatreeelodge.com

East of the National park

Camps east of the Mpata Gorge are usually reached from the village of Luangwa, which itself is readily accessible by 2WD from the Great East Road.

- 18 **Zambezi River Lodge** Tel: 01 250972 or 097 826177
- 19 **Redcliff Zambezi Lodge** www.redcliff-lodge.com