





Valley of life

Jonathan Scott watches wildlife in Zambia's South Luangwa National Park. Pictures by Jonathan and Angela Scott



ZAMBIA CONJURES UP IMAGES

in my mind of a 1970s visit when the Copper Belt – bedrock of the economy – saw prices hit record lows, almost crippling a nation struggling to forge a socialist solution to nation-building. Our hosts at the time had hoarded supplies of cheese and farm produce, to ensure that we lacked for nothing. We headed home to East Africa with wonderful memories of their hospitality, laden with souvenirs: carvings crafted from beautiful green malachite stone, ornate copper bracelets, and hand-painted wall hangings. The Zambians lived up to their reputation of being among the friendliest people on earth – the country's greatest asset.

There was no time to visit the country's parks on that occasion. But I was already familiar with the South Luangwa and Kafue National Parks, from my journeys through Africa some years earlier. They were wild stretches of country, where the park warden and conservationist Norman Carr had pioneered





walking safaris. Carr helped to create a new kind of experience for visitors, a world away from the mass tourism and zebra-striped minibuses that dominated East Africa's tourism then.

In 2001, my wife Angie and I were back in southern Africa to research a book on big cats, focusing on South Luangwa as one of the best places to see leopards. The Valley, as it is known locally, certainly delivered a sense of wilderness and spectacular

sightings of elephants crossing the river, but the famous Luangwa leopards eluded us for much of our visit. They were there, of course, lurking in the shadows, their spotted coats ensuring they remained hidden. By then I knew only too well that you need plenty of time if you want to get serious about watching big cats. It had taken me six years to complete my first book on leopards – that's how difficult it was in the 1970s and 1980s to find a leopard, let alone photograph one.

During our visit, we stopped at Mfuwe Lodge, two kilometres from the park entrance, where we met legendary game warden Phil Berry and his partner Babette Alfieri. Phil and Babette run Kuenda, one of Mfuwe's tented camps, which is located about an hour's drive south of the lodge and hosts eight guests in rustic splendour. Tourism here is based on the bush-camp experience, with little chance of seeing other visitors on your walk or drive. People love this approach. There are less vehicles and more privacy, with standards of guiding that make your safari educational as well as exciting.

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THE RIVER FORMS A RIBBON OF LIFE THAT DRAWS ANIMALS TO ITS MEANDERING WATERS

” The Luangwa River forms the eastern boundary of the park, a ribbon of life that draws animals to its meandering waters throughout the year, never more so than during the dry season from June to October. The seasonal spectacle of carmine bee-eaters nesting along the sandy banks of the river is not to be missed. It is a riot of colour and activity as the birds hawk for insects, accompanied by squeals of delight as their human audience celebrates the perfect shot.

Meanwhile, herds of elephants come down to drink at the water's edge or to cross out of the park, at times raiding the local villages for food. In places, pods of hippos, 100-strong, snooze and chortle in their watery refuge, trekking miles into the grasslands at night: dark rotund shapes ghosting among the shadows in search of the last of the grasses, scouring the forest for the sausage-like fruits scattered beneath the Kigelia trees that are a vital nourishment for them at the height of the dry season.

Baboons, impala and puku gather here during the daytime, to feast on the sausage trees' crimson orchid-like flowers. And as the



sun sets, fishermen ply the river in their dugout canoes to check their nets, ignoring the crocodiles lying watching in the shallows.

Mfuwe Lodge and the Valley are now a regular fixture in our calendar. We return each year to host a week-long photographic safari with Phil and Babette and the team at the lodge, guided by two exceptional local guides, Peter Milanzi and Manda Chisanga.

We favour the onset of the 'green season' at the end of October and early November, when the rains are imminent. This is the time when Mfuwe's most famous residents make an almost daily appearance at the lodge, marching through reception to take advantage of the abundance of food on offer around the camp. I'm talking, of course, of Wonky Tusk and her family, a herd of wild elephants who probably roamed this area long before the lodge was established, feasting on the wild mangoes that ripen and fall from the trees at this time of year.

We never tire of witnessing and photographing this extraordinary event. The watchmen keep an eager eye out for Wonky and Co, with



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word travelling quickly among the staff and guests when an elephant is spotted heading for the lodge. Everyone tucks himself or herself safely behind the reception, or peers from around the corners of pillars and doorways in the lounge area, to enjoy the spectacle.

Wonky Tusk is the matriarch of her family, an imposing yet gentle giant weighing around three tons, who moves in that quiet and effortless way that is so deceptive – you need to keep your wits

about you when elephants are in residence. Up the steps she strides with never a moment's hesitation, her latest calf clinging like a limpet to her side. She sweeps through the reception to the front lawn, deftly picking up the mangoes in her trunk as other members of her family join the party.

Within seconds, up to ten elephants are scouring the lawn and hovering up the fruit. Then suddenly they're gone again – though not always: the day after



In pictures:

Abundant wildlife lives in Zambia's South Luangwa National Park, including elephants, big cats, crocodiles and antelope.

Jonathan and Angie Scott will be returning to Zambia for their next photographic safari in November 2012. (see www.mfuwelodge.com)

we left, Wonky Tusk and her family spent the morning on the lawn, lying down to snooze for a while, their stomachs full of fruit.

On quieter days, everyone tends to head out on a morning game drive at 6 AM to search for the other creatures that have helped to make the Valley such a calling card for visitors. Leopards and wild dogs, carmine bee-eaters and Pel's fishing owls head the list.

The joy of Luangwa is the sense of wilderness, epitomised by the quiet and tranquillity of the ebony groves – oases of shade along the river under towering stands of 30-metre trees, where elephant families gather to feed or sleep in the heat of the day, their calves prostrating themselves among the towering legs of the adults.

Troops of yellow baboons and parties of helmeted guinea fowls roost here at night and, as the first rays of sun filter down through the trees, they offer plenty of opportunities for great photography. These are places of solitude and reflection – a chance to let all the worries and pressures of life slip from your shoulders, a chance to soothe the soul. 