

**A Photographic Safari to Zambia**  
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Often described as one of Africa's last true wildernesses, Zambia had been high on my wish list of destinations for some years. After terrific self-drive travels through South Africa, Swaziland and Namibia, this year we finally exchanged the beaten tared and gravel tracks of Southern Africa for the supposedly pothole-covered "spoomarks" of David Livingstone himself.

Zambia is a very large country, and except for the main routes (north, south, east and west) from Lusaka, the capital and central province, most roads are mere sandy paths, dotted with stretches of potholes strung together with strips of tar. That meant we could not see all highlights of Zambia in the three weeks we had to spend in our rented 4x4 vehicle – the only type of rental vehicle that is (rightfully) allowed to be taken outside Lusaka city limits.

Therefore, we set our goals and planned to visit the famous South Luangwa National Park, Lower Zambezi National Park and the rather undiscovered Kafue National Park. According to the promising advertising texts from the National Tourist Board, we wouldn't be disappointed!

"Land of the legendary African walking safari, earth's biggest waterfall, the wild Zambezi River, breath-taking lakes and wetlands, a profusion of birds, abundant wildlife, and raw, pulsating wilderness . . . all in one friendly country."



### **South Luangwa National Park**

South Luangwa is an amazing place, a true wilderness and a photographer's Garden of Eden. It takes some time to reach (unless you go by plane), but the rewards are beyond words, with a great variety of wild animals and birds seemingly waiting to have their pictures taken. The scenery is great as well, with vast stretches of acacia-dotted savannah and perfectly still ox bow lakes.



According to the Zambia National Tourist Board:

“Experts have dubbed South Luangwa as one of the greatest wildlife sanctuaries in the world, and not without reason. The concentration of game around the Luangwa river and its ox bow lagoons is among the most intense in Africa. There are 60 different animal species and over 400 different bird species.”

Vervet Monkeys raid the campsite for your hard-earned lunch, the ubiquitous impala and puku are truly difficult to avoid and grunting hippo whine and moan all day about their life in the dirt. Your first sight in the morning when opening your eyes is that of elephants quietly crossing the Luangwa River in the soft light of dawn. Maybe having these sights at home would facilitate my getting up on those infamous Monday mornings.

Add an abundance of bird species, of which the magnificent Fish Eagle, various species of stork and all kinds of waterfowl are amongst the most regularly seen, and you may get an idea of the never-ending line of subjects. Even my slowly but solidly built frustration with (the absence of) leopards got to an abrupt ending when we saw three of them in one night. That surely justifies South Luangwa’s nickname “leopard capital of the world.”

The organized game drives with Zambia’s world famous guides are superb and almost always lead to sightings of the more interesting mammals, mostly the carnivores. Most guides, in fact, only search for the big cats, because that is what the tourists want to see. The guides pay little or no attention to smaller, but nonetheless interesting, subjects such as kingfishers, bee-eaters and squirrels.



Also, the guides are not very knowledgeable about photography, often stopping the car at the wrong place and thus creating backlit situations, cluttered backgrounds and the prospect of long nights with your favourite image editor.

That is why a self-drive can be rewarding in its own way; you have the full control over all aspects of your photography, such as subject, background and angle and quality of the light. And also, you can easily shut off the engine, something the guides not always dare to do when driving you around through lion country in something that can be best described as an obsolete, eastern European lawnmower.

The only thing that really keeps your camera from a 24/7 operation in South Luangwa is the eternal quest for the good light and the need for food and sleep. I for one needed someone to remind me of the latter.

### **Lower Zambezi National Park**

“The birdlife along the riverbanks is exceptional. Many a fish eagle can be seen and heard for miles around. Nesting along the cliffs are white fronted and carmine bee-eaters. Another unusual: the red winged pratincole, the elegant crested guinea fowl, black eagle, and vast swarms of quelea. In summer the stunning narina trogon makes its home here. Other specialities are the trumpeter hornbill, Meyers parrot and Lilian’s lovebird.”

- Zambia National Tourist Board

We did not even have to enter the National Park itself to be able to see a wide variety of animals; westayed at a campsite in

the Game Management Area (GMA), an hour's drive from the park entrance. Crocodiles do their driftwood imitations all over the place, Monitor Lizards play hide and seek in the murky water and elephants, hippo and buffalo regularly cross the river to graze the lush grass on one of the small islands that dot the Zambezi.



Several fish eagles soared above our heads, jacana's hitchhiked on floating hippo (much to their dislike), Pied Kingfishers hovered above the water in search of an easy bite and every afternoon a flock of Cattle Egrets left their daytime jobs with the buffalo for a frog-feast at the shoreline, all within reach of our lenses. At night, the elephants worked hard on a new garden design, which included a clearing just next to our tent. We decided not to disturb them during their nocturnal horticulture practice and simply wait to evaluate the results of their hard work in the morning.

Good advice: arrange a canoe trip on the Zambezi! Paddling across the smooth surface is an experience of great serenity; one which brings you very close to hippo, buffalo, elephant and crocodile as well as the abundant birdlife that inhabits the riverine forests. Too close sometimes, as demonstrated by the huge hippo bite marks in the tucked-away canoe of less fortunate tourists, which we were shown only after we had safely returned from our trip.

## Kafue National Park

Kafue National Park is only open for tourism during about five months per year because in the wet season it is, well, wet. This wet season had been particularly so, therefore not all of the Busanga region (the far north) was reachable by car. Also, since most of the park was still lush, the large herds of antelope had yet to feel the urge to go to the open plains. So, there was no full menu of antelope, and no large prides of lion eager to choose from the variety of prey. But we didn't have time to feel disappointed, since so much was still to be seen and photographed in the passable regions of the park.

As described by the Tourist Board:

"From the astounding Busanga Plains in the northwestern section of the park to the tree-choked wilderness and the lush dambos of the south, fed by the emerald green Lunga, Lufupa and Kafue Rivers, the park sustains huge herds of a great diversity of wildlife. From the thousands of Red Lechwe on the Plains, the ubiquitous puku, the stately sable and Roan Antelopes in the woodland to the diminutive oribi and duiker. The solid-rumped Defassa Waterbuck, herds of tsessebe, hartebeest, zebra and buffalo make for a full menu of antelope."



Our tent was just a meter away from the bank of the Lufupa River, and we could have easily spent our days photographing only the kingfishers that visited their many favourite vantage perches at fixed intervals, like suburban bus drivers. Luckily, we didn't (I don't like public transport), and thus were able to photograph mammals, birds and reptiles, such as lion, hippo, crocodiles, elephant, warthog, various antelope, Fish Eagles, bee-eaters, plovers, francolins, egrets, darters and many more. During the night, what seemed to be distant whooping of hyena and the responding roars of lion were a testimony to their everlasting rivalry. Not being able to sleep had never felt that great before! Being told next morning that the lion actually had trotted through the campsite could not have felt better.

Like in South Luangwa National Park, the Kafue guides were very adept at following animal tracks and had an enormous knowledge to share with anyone interested. The best part about Kafue though was the absence of large crowds of tourists. On most game drives, be it organized or self drive, we did not see any other vehicles, even though there were only two roads in either direction. There in Kafue, we really experienced the true sense and feeling of the African bush. And the smell, courtesy of an affectionate crocodile carcass that had floated nearby for the whole week, no matter what direction we would go.

Zambia truly is a very rewarding destination for the avid wildlife and bird photographer, with ample photo opportunities around every proverbial corner of the long and unwinding roads. If you are really into experiencing the wild, I would suggest camping along the banks of one of Zambia's mighty rivers and cooking your own meals on a campfire. Although campsites aren't as abundant as the expensive lodges, you can find at least one at every major tourist destination.

If flimsy tents aren't your thing, and you have some money to spare, you might consider one of the many idyllic lodges. Although I must say even these get their fair share of visitors. On more than one occasion, the cottage tourists counted one more trunk in their room than they had brought.



Marijn Heuts is a nature photographer from the Netherlands. More of his photos from Zambia can be viewed on his website, [www.destinationanywhere.nl](http://www.destinationanywhere.nl). Please feel free to email Marijn with any queries on traveling to and around Zambia. For further information on matters of interest to tourists, go to [Zambia's National Tourist Board website](#).

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