DREAM CATCHERS

Our accommodation guide to help you find the pick of the pillows in one of Africa’s most remarkable wildlife regions: the Lower Zambezi Valley.

AWAKENINGS

Sunrise in the Lower Zambezi Valley and the low light pours across the floodplains, igniting the tops of the winterthorn glades where elephants are feeding on fallen seedpods. No matter where you stay – luxury lodge, no-frills bushcamp or star bed sleep-out – wild Africa is all around you. The night air echoes to the rumble of lions. You fall asleep to the honking of hippos and awake to the yelping cries of fish eagles. Through it all runs the mighty Zambezi, Africa’s fourth longest river; its mile-wide waters forming a natural barrier between Zimbabwe and Zambia who together share its natural wonders. On the Zimbabwean side is Mana Pools National Park, a stunning UNESCO World Heritage site half the size of Surrey. On the opposite bank lies Zambia’s Lower Zambezi National Park, a pristine wilderness lying at the foot of the Zambezi escarpment. Together they are a perfect hunting ground for lions, leopards and wild dogs; but above all this timeless valley is a land of giants, of towering winterthorns and the elephant herds that find sanctuary beneath their dappled shade.

WORDS: BRIAN JACKMAN

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WORDS: BRIAN JACKMAN
The ‘Middle Zambezi Valley Wildlife Complex’ extends along 160 miles of the Zambezi River between the Kariba and Cabora Bassa reservoirs, where the Zambezi Valley itself is defined by its twin escarpments, rising some 2000ft above the Valley lowlands. The northern escarpment lies close to the Zambian shore; on the Zimbabwean side, it lies up to 50km south of the Zambezi itself. The entire complex covers about 14,000sq km. So why is so much of the wildlife tourism to this magnificent area confined to the (very roughly) 40sq km Mana floodplain (more locally known as ‘jesse bush’)?

Tourism tends to focus on spectacular gatherings of wildlife; and the Mana floodplains are one of very few – and certainly the largest – spectacular dry-season ‘concentration areas’ for wildlife in the entire valley. The remainder of the area is of great interest to biologists and conservationists, and essential to the survival of Zambezi Valley wildlife, but less immediately attractive for tourists. Much of it consists of rather featureless savanna and other woodland, the main exception being the ‘dry forest’ known to locals as ‘jesse bush’. Visitors by road will pass through these forests shortly before reaching the floodplain. They contain trees that are found nowhere else in the world; and you may see the relatively uncommon crested guineafowl, or glimpse the shy nyala antelope which has been largely untouched during the rainy months. Thirdly, the winterthorns (Faidherbia albida) woodlands that have developed on these silts have a so-called ‘reverse foliage cycle’; they shed their leaves in summer and grow them again as winter approaches. So they represent an irresistible supply of dry-season browsing and develop an abundance of highly nutritious pods beloved by elephants in particular. This is why one of the archetypal Mana Pools photos is of an elephant bull reaching up to pull down a leaf and pod laden winterthorn branch.

By the time most visitors arrive – during the dry season – most of the ‘understorey’ of grasses and shrubs has gone, providing long vistas in which other species – notably impala, zebra, kudu, ‘cloud’ and indeed lions and wild dogs – are easily spotted. The floodplains offer a unique combination of woodland, water and spectacular scenery. One of the ‘tricks’ of visiting Mana is to select a camp that has a good view of the Zambezi and the escarpment beyond. Given the right spot, you hardly need stir from your chair to witness the incredible mingling of wildlife and majestic scenery.

Inevitably, the Middle Zambezi complex has become a magnet for tourism and its accompanying development, ranging from relatively simple fishing camps – mostly lying in the so-called ‘safari areas’ that flank the Mana Pools National Park itself – to upmarket safari camps, the latter being largely concentrated along the river frontage of the floodplains. This is understandable, but has brought problems of its own. Competition among safari operators for the much-coveted riverfront sites is fierce. Meanwhile, a cash-strapped Zimbabwe National Parks Authority (ZimParks) has hitherto managed to maintain a reasonable space between such concessions. The ‘Sapi Safari Area’ (formerly used for hunting) on its eastern boundary has recently become a photographic safari concession (see box, page 67); and ZimParks has also made considerable efforts to make tourism concessions available to operators further within the Mana Pools National Park. But viable sites in these hinterland areas are few and far between, and even those operators who have taken them up often find it necessary to extend their activities into the floodplain frontage in order to maintain their own competitive positions.

The risk does therefore exist that the Mana floodplain will become a victim of its own popularity, particularly during the peak tourism dry-season months from August through to the onset of the rains in November. Nevertheless, this concern, the Mana floodplains offer some of the finest wildlife experiences available in southern Africa – and unique advantages as well, because of their open nature and superb visibility. Provided you pay for a day’s licence and exercise caution and common sense, self-drive
The accommodation options within the Mana Pools National Park and adjacent Sapi wilderness area vary in size and design. All are subject to strict environmental impact criteria which demand preservation of the area’s unique wilderness values. Most of the camps are seasonal (closed during the rainy season months – usually December to March – because access is very limited). During the safari season (April–October), access is either by air charter, 4WD road transfer or self-drive. A standard fare of US$250 per person, per night, for shared accommodation, includes all activities, with game drives and walks the principle, are offered at most camps. It is likely they will operate or be able to organise canoeing trips on the Zambezi with a specialist professional guide.

W H E R E  T O  S T A Y

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RIVERFRONT LODGES/CAMPS

The largest facilities, situated in their own, exclusive-use concession areas. The biggest accommodates 32 guests.

1. Ruckomechi Camp and Little Ruckomechi (Wilderness Safaris)
   A permanent camp on a private concession in woodland near the confluence of the Zambezi and Ruckomechi Rivers. It has 10 spacious en-suite tents built on wooden platforms and an expansive wooden-decked central living area, with dining, sitting, bar area, pool, and a star-gazing deck. Within the concession is Little Ruckomechi tented camp, which is available for exclusive use by groups of up to six people.

2. Vundu Camp (Bushlife Safaris)
   This camp has seven spacious tented units, each en-suite chalets and a family unit. Its large, double-storey, wooden central living area is set under shady trees overlooking the river. The main camp is complemented by Little Vundu, a smaller tented bush camp. It is upriver. Visitors can be booked for exclusive use and is designed for those who prefer a more traditional tented camp safari experience. Vundu Camp is renowned for its successful anti-poaching efforts. Bushlife Safaris also offer Ruwezi Canoe Trails – mobile canoeing safaris along the Zambezi – and a mobile tented camp at Chitake Springs in the south of Mana Pools.

3. Mana Pools Safari Lodge (Zambezi Cruise & Safaris)
   This extensive lodge is located at the western end of the Mana Pools floodplain area. Set into thick natural woodland of riverine figs, African mango and Apple ring albida trees, it consists of 12 thatched and decked chalets and a vast main decked living area, with a covered swimming pool.

   Nyamatusi Camp consists of six luxury tented suites set in a remote part of Mana Pools, downstream from the main floodplain. The camp is spread out widely along the banks of the Zambezi, overlooking the river and the hills of the Zambian escarpment beyond. Its smaller family camp, Nyamatusi Mahogany, consists of two luxury tented suites and two family suites.

5. Chikweyena Camp (Wilderness Safaris)
   Chikweyena Camp is situated on a private concession at the eastern boundary of Mana Pools overlooking the confluence of the Sapi and Ruckomechi Rivers, with a backdrop of the Zambian escarpment. The camp has seven luxury tents, including two family units. All stand on raised wooden decks with pine walkways linking them to the raised main area.

6. Sapi Explorers Camp (Great Plains Conservation)
   This 20,000 hectare private Sapi concession adjacent to and downstream of Mana Pools was awarded to operators Great Plains Conservation in 2016 and converted to a private photographic reserve (see ‘Mana from heaven’, p67). Sapi Explorers Camp is situated on the river front, was the first development to be built on the new concession, with five en-suite Explorers-style tents. At Sapi Springs Camp, located inland on the Sapi River, a small group of guests have the opportunity to overnight in the open-air, on a raised platform, under a canopy of indigenous trees. This camp will be rebuilt, and new camps developed, in the coming years.

INLAND LODGES/CAMPS

These are slightly smaller (maximum 14 guests), but also on private concession areas. A further three or four are being developed, including one at Ingwe Pan by Machaba Safaris.

7. Kavinga Safari Camp
   This camp is located just off the main Mana Pools access road in the southern part of the National Park, 8km from Chitake Spring. It has seven raised platform chalets and a central living/dining area which are set on the edge of a steep cliff overlooking the expansive bed of the upper Ruckomechi River, where a spring attracts wildlife all year round. The camp faces the sunrise over the magnificent backdrop of the Zambian escarpment, and is becoming renowned for close-up photographic opportunities from a purpose-built hide next to the waterhole below the camp.

   This attractive 12-bedded tented camp is delicately built on decking around the edge of the Kangwa Pan. Two of the luxury tents are honeymoon suites or family units, with private dining and seating areas. A lounge area under the shade of large trees overlooks the splash pool and pan, creating a perfect setting for an ‘armchair safari’ (as described in issue 87), especially during the driest months (July – November).
ROBIN POPE SAFARIS

Kanga or Nyamatusi camps. (December–March). They accommodate a maximum of 12 guests, and operate for only half the year, being privately-run camps spaced out along the Zambezi River frontage. They nestle under some enormous mahogany trees. The tents have individual flush toilets and en suite but showers are communal. The core product of this long-established safari company is mobile canned safaris, individually suited for small groups of six-to-eight people. However, in Mana Pools Natureways also offers static tented camps and guided walking safaris.

11 Meinilunga Safaris

With a warm family atmosphere of home-away-from-home and a reputation for wholesome cuisine, Meinilunga consists of six twin tents and a central living/dining area nestled under some enormous mahogany trees. The tents have individual flush toilets in en suite but showers are communal. Meinilunga also offers a mobile safari option to Chitake Springs.

12 Hollaith Camp

Stretch Ferreira is one of Mana’s most renowned professional guides. Reminiscent of an Out of Africa-era, this re-designed camp consists of seven East African-style tents, blending seamlessly into the bush.

13 John’s Camp (Robin Pope Safaris)

A traditional, colonial-style 10-bed tented camp with a modern touch, overlooking a vast area of open floodplain. The management team is a family affair, led by John Stevens, one of Africa’s most experienced guides and a co-founder of the Zambezi Elephant Fund which successfully raises funds worldwide for conservation activities in Zimbabwe’s Zambezi Valley.

MOBILE TENTED CAMPS

Temporary camps, taking a maximum of eight guests, erected at various sites along the Zambezi River or inland at Chitake Springs in the southern section of the Park.

14 Natureways Safaris

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15 James Varden Safaris

James Varden is recognised as one of Africa’s top professional walking guides, with more than 25 years of experience. In combination with Natureways and his horse-riding safari company, Ride Zimbabwe, he offers a variety of activities from his mobile tented camp.

ZIMPARKS ACCOMMODATION

The Zimbabwe National Parks Authority (Zimparks) offers a variety of budget accommodation near their Nyamepi office and at Chitake Springs.

15 lodges and cottages

There are two self-catering eight-bed double-storey lodges and three four-bed cottages located upstream from the Zimparks office at Nyamepi. These are equipped with furniture and bedding, basic kitchen facilities, gas stove, fridge and bathrooms with flush toilets, hot showers and/or baths. The facilities are serviced.

Tented Camp and campsite

Just upstream from the Zimparks lodges, at Gwaya Camp, are five self-catering, en suite tents overlooking the river. These each accommodate two people and are fully-equipped with a barbeque stand and a separate kitchenette adjacent to the tent. The tented camp is serviced. Nyamepi campsite. This consists of about 30 camping sites, with four basic ablution blocks which have flush toilets, showers and hot and cold running water. Water is available from several taps in the campsite, and firewood can be purchased at the Parks office. The camp is not fenced, so it is necessary to exercise caution as wild animals can wander through.

Exclusive use campsites

These remote camping sites have no facilities, at all except for a long-drop toilet each. They are available to groups of 6-12 visitors and are located at various places along the Zambezi River (New Nkogwe, Mucheni’s 2 & 3) and at Chitake Springs in the extreme south of the Park.

MANA FROM HEAVEN

Recognising the importance of the 105,000-hectare Sapi wilderness area, adjacent to Mana Pools National Parks, ZimParks awarded the concession to Great Plains Conservation in 2016, who have transformed it into a private photographic reserve and conservation area.

For decades Sapi had been used for hunting by previous concessionaires. Not only is it believed that this change of use will allow wildlife to flourish, but also that the expansion of protected wilderness around Mana Pools will go some way to relieving the pressure of overpopulation (of camps and animals) in the National Park itself.

To aid the area’s recovery, Great Plains has adopted an approach designed, it says, to “encourage wildlife back into the reserve”. Having stopped the hunting, the team conducted a survey of what species they had, brought in scientists and ex-hunters who know the area to assist with the rehabilitation project – a move that has seen “elephant and buffalo herds beginning to treat this part of the land as well as the continuous movement of human kind within their environment”.

With just two camps in the concession – the five-tent, 10-guest Explorers Camp and the smaller Sapi Springs, which is to be rebuilt – Sapi is yours to explore exclusively, although that exclusivity, naturally, comes at a price. However, with around 80 per cent of the area only accessible by foot, this is prime walking and canoeing country.

Renowned filmmaker and CEO of Great Plains, Dereck Joubert explains the concept behind the camps: “I think you miss out so much if you arrive by air, get on a vehicle, go to the camp, drive, have lunch, dinner, drive and fly out. That isn’t Africa. Not my Africa anyway.

“You can expect walking safaris from the edge of Mana Pools down the Zambezi through great elephant and lion country, into the interior to giant baobabs. We want to transport you into the safari of Hemingway’s days or Selous or Burton and Speke... without the constant barrage of gunfire they used to annihilate the big game.”

PHIL CLISBY
The Lower Zambezi Valley is relatively pristine wilderness. It's a National Park surrounded by a much larger Game Management Area (GMA), but there are no fences between the two and animals are free to roam throughout the area. The GMA acts as a buffer zone between the National Park and areas of human settlement, to reduce human/wildlife conflict and to stop human encroachment. Whilst some GMAs permit hunting, the Lower Zambezi National Park (LZNP) is unique in that the Chiawa GMA on its western boundary is a no-hunting zone, enabling photographic safari camps to be sited here.

Together these encompass 20,000sq km. In fact, Zambia has the second largest proportion of land under protected status in southern Africa: approximately 225,000sq km or 56 per cent of the total land cover. Of this, 8 per cent are national parks and 22 per cent are Game Management Areas.

Along the northern boundary the Zambezi escarpment acts as a physical barrier, and the bulk of the park consists of hilly ground. As a result, most of the wildlife is concentrated on the valley floor, in the flat alluvial plains beside the river, and it is primarily for this reason that the lodges are found here.

The Lower Zambezi is relatively undeveloped, its appeal lying in its very wildness. Opportunities to get up close to wildlife abound, from herds of elephant to leopards to fish eagles and everything in between. This is a picturesque riverine landscape of ebony, leadwood, acacia and fig trees. Natal mahoganies, lala palms, winterthorns and battle-scarred baobabs stand tall. Oxbow lakes abound, many glowing luminously green with water hyacinth. And with the glorious Zambezi glowing luminously green with water hyacinth. And with the glorious Zambezi

WHERE TO STAY

The lodges in the Lower Zambezi Valley are stretched out along the banks of the Zambezi River, either in the National Park or in the GMAs. Roughly speaking, they're priced according to their distance to the Park, with those in the Park at the top end and budget options further out in the GMA. Land in the GMA is occupied on a 99-year lease, with the first option to renew going to the existing owner, thus allowing the lodges to be custodians of these areas. Operators within the park, however, are given 10-year renewable leases. Some of the lodges close at some point during the rainy season, usually somewhere between November and the end of April.

1 Chilwero Camp
   Situated high up on the banks of the Zambezi, near the confluence with the Kafue River, Chilwero offers a variety of accommodation styles and budgets, from air-conditioned chalets to self-catering and camping. The Lower Zambezi NP is 65km downstream.

2 Kakumbi Safari
   Situated high up on the banks of the Kafue River, Kakumbi is a popular family getaway, accommodating up to 20 people. The spacious restaurant and bar overlook the branches of a giant wild mango tree.

3 Kanyemba Island Bush Camp
   This was one of the first lodges to be established in the Lower Zambezi Valley. Situated on banks of the Kafue River, 6km from the Zambezi and only 145km from Lusaka, it is easily accessible throughout the year. Accommodation ranges from chalets to camping for all budgets.

4 Mvuu Lodge
   Situated along a stretch of the Zambezi River overlooking Zimbabwe’s Mana Pools, the area is great for wildlife and birdlife.

ZAMBIA / ZIMBABWE

Lower Zambezi Valley

ZAMBIAN SIDE

By extending the amount of land under protection, there's more space for lodges to spread out along the bank of the Zambezi.

WORDS: SARAH KINGDOM

OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2019

TRAVEL AFRICA

WHERE TO STAY

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Chiawa Camp (Chiawa Safaris)
Located inside the National Park under a grove of mahogany and acacia trees, Chiawa Camp offers nine tented rooms, raised on wooden decks, each with private verandahs. In the main camp area there is an elevated observation deck above the lounge, a swimming pool that's large enough for laps, and a gym. Chiawa is closed from January to the end of April.
10 Old Mondoro (Chiawa Safaris)  
About an hour downstream from Chiawa, in a grove of Winterthorn trees, Old Mondoro is an intimate, simple safari camp overlooking a maze of hippo-inhabited channels. The area is characterised by a vast floodplain and open woodland making it ideal for walking and game viewing. The unfenced camp has four reed chalets with canvas roofs, giving it a ‘back to the bush’ atmosphere. The camp is closed from January to the end of April.

11 Mwambashi River Lodge  
Catering for up to 22 guests in 10 suites with differing characteristics. The Zambezi Suite, with its open sides, is a particular favourite. Includes a gym. Open from April to November.

12 Sausage Tree Camp and Potato Bush Camp  
A private camp at the heart of the park, where every tent has a dedicated butler. The epitome of bush chic, Sausage Tree Camp has eight, slightly raised, reed, wood and canvas tents, each with a private pool and expansive deck. In addition there is a two-bedroom house, perfect for family or a small groups. It’s sister camp, Potato Bush, is located nearby. Each of its three tents has a large deck and plunge pool, indoor/outdoor showers and hammocks. There is a fourth family tent. Both Sausage Tree and Potato Bush are closed from January till the end of March.

13 Tusk & Mane  
The relative new boys to the Valley, Tusk & Mane offer something a little different: safaris between three eight-bed fly camps that are moved between very different sites on islands in the river and, soon, a site in the Rufunsa Valley, at the foot of the escarpment, thus allowing visitors to experience the river and hills. The camps offer old-style safari camping, with bucket showers but still with ice cold drinks and comfy beds, and sitting under the stars around a campfire. Best suited to those who are looking to immerse themselves in the wilderness without too much paraphernalia.

14 Anabezi and Amanzi  
Anabezi is located in the remote eastern end of the Park, in an area that used to be the governor’s retreat, where the Zambezi River and the Mushika floodplain meet. The camp is perched on the riverbank, with raised timber decks and wooden walkways. Eleven luxurious tents each have views over the river and private plunge pools.

Amanzi is Anabezi’s rustic sister camp, sited 3km downstream. It offers only three tents (one of which is a family unit) built on raised decks. Both camps are closed from January till the end of April.

CARBON NEUTRALITY  
In 2016 Lower Zambezi was proclaimed the world’s first Carbon-Neutral National Park. To achieve this recognition tour operators reduced their carbon emissions and those emissions which were unavoidable were offset by investment in Rufunsa GMA forests to the northeast of the Park. The scheme, known as the Lower Zambezi REDD+ Project, protects a 40,126 hectare section of miombo forest in the Lower Zambezi escarpment which, in turn, provides a 60km buffer along the threatened boundary in the hills directly north of the LZNP. It partners with over 5000 people in Rufunsa District to conserve the forest through livelihood and community development initiatives. The first lodges in LZNP to sign up to the initiative were Chiawa Camp and Old Mondoro, and they say by offsetting 1200 tonnes of carbon emissions, they personally are protecting an estimated 403 hectares of Zambian forest (approximately 3228 trees), and removing enough CO2 from the atmosphere to be equivalent of taking 215 cars off the road for a year.