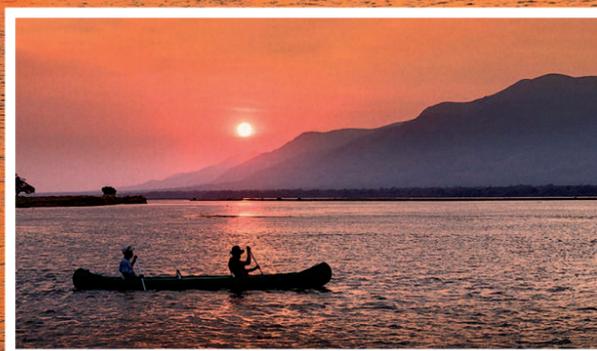


Marvelous mana...

African Bush Camps blends the thrill of being in the wild with a bit of luxury for an unforgettable camping/safari experience.



There was a low rumble of elephants. You could almost feel the air vibrating with the sound. The herd approached the waterhole, splashing into the water. One large male attempted full immersion by lying on his side and ducking his head underwater. This was a family, with a tiny baby in tow. The baby was trying hard to join in with the 'teenagers' and would disappear underwater for extended periods of time.

Each time I would start to become alarmed and wonder if the baby would ever resurface, a tiny trunk would appear, like a snorkel, just above the waterline. The two teenagers were almost completely immersed and I wondered how on earth the baby was managing to tread water for so long. Then, tired of the game, the elephants

stood up and I realised they'd only been in knee-deep water. I did, however, also notice that the baby, at full height, only reached his playmates' knees!

We were at African Bush Camps' Kanga Camp in Mana Pools National Park, Zimbabwe—a World Heritage Site of incredible wilderness and beauty, home to more than 12,000 elephants, which were definitely going to be one of the highlights of our stay. After a delectable dinner overlooking the same waterhole that the elephants had been using as their swimming pool, we retired to bed. In the middle of the night we were abruptly woken up by what sounded like an elephant with chronic irritable bowel syndrome rearranging the furniture on our verandah. Peering out into the dark, we could see nothing. We never did get to the bottom of what caused the

midnight commotion, and when we got up in the morning all the furniture appeared to be where we had left it. A smear of mud on one corner of the verandah did, however, provide a clue that perhaps it had been used as a convenient elephant 'scratching post' under cover of darkness.

Mana Pools is a 219,600ha wildlife conservation area, National Park and World Heritage Site in northern Zimbabwe, situated along the lower stretches of the Zambezi River. The river has, over time, gradually changed its course, leaving in its wake river channels, oxbow lakes and seasonal pools that are surrounded by forests of winter thorn, mahogany, wild fig, ebony and baobab trees. Mana is the Shona (local language) word for 'four' and within the park, the abandoned river channels have created four large pools, giving



the park its name. All this water provides an abundance of vegetation, attracting a wealth of wildlife. In the dry season, the shady glades beneath the trees are filled with concentrations of wildlife: herds of impala, eland, elephant, zebra, buffalo, waterbuck and kudu.

These populations provide plentiful supply of prey for predators and scavengers. There are several sizeable prides of lion, as well as populations of leopard and hyena. Mana Pools is also a stronghold for African wild dog, sometimes called painted wolves.

Situated in one of the remotest parts of Mana Pools National Park, 15km from the Zambezi River, Kanga Camp combines luxury with seclusion, with a hint of raw wilderness thrown in for good measure. Kanga Camp was, however, just a pit stop on our way deeper into Mana Pools, but it was not the last we would see of elephants.

Next stop on the agenda was Zambezi Expeditions, another of African Bush Camps' beautiful locations, this time perched on the banks of the river, with the magnificent backdrop of Zambia and the Zambezi Escarpment across the water. Zambezi Expeditions is one of the regular haunts of Boswell, an elephant famous in the area, who is known for his tendency to stand on his hind legs when reaching for succulent-looking branches and fruit that would otherwise be out of reach. We had a couple of close encounters with Boswell during our stay, once when we were on foot

and he was mere metres away and once while we were on the river.

The Zambezi River at Mana Pools is wide and dotted with islands. Over 350 bird species flourish here, from Goliath herons, cormorants, storks and kingfishers to spur-winged geese, brilliantly coloured bee-eaters and magnificent black and white fish eagles. Hippos warm themselves on the river's edge in the morning sun, and share submerged sandbanks with silent crocodiles. The silhouettes of elephants and buffalo are visible wading in the shallows and feeding on the banks.

Driving out from Zambezi Expeditions, we stumbled upon a pack of 16 wild dogs. They lay napping in a shady depression, camouflaged in their mottled coats. Aside from the occasional flick of a tail, the pack lay motionless. We were transfixed. As the sun sank lower in the sky, one by one the dogs woke up, yawned and stretched. Getting to their feet, they exchanged elaborate greetings, whimpering as they sniffed, smelt and licked one another. The dogs became livelier and, in preparation for their evening hunt, they evacuated their digestive systems. It suddenly became apparent what the 20 to 30 hooded vultures we'd seen 'lurking in the wings' had been waiting for: I watched in horror as they squabbled over and made quick work of the dogs' 'deposits'. There was a light-hearted atmosphere among the pack of wild dogs – they pranced around, making half-hearted, playful attempts to

catch the still-lurking vultures. Then, with playtime over, it was time to get to work. We watched as they readied themselves for the night's hunt. A hyena appeared on the scene, obviously intending to follow the dogs and hoping to cash in on their hard work and score himself a free meal.

Breakfast at Zambezi Expeditions is an atmospheric experience. We sat around the campfire, holding cups of tea or coffee, as the sun came up. Forty or 50 impala were grazing on the riverbank below as the world woke up around us. We chatted about the hyena calls we had heard in the night and were told how, earlier that morning, when reporting for duty, the chef had found hyena tracks circling the kitchen tent, which, luckily for us, had been well secured against the midnight marauders.

After breakfast, it was time for a walk. Wildlife in Mana Pools is very relaxed about people on foot. As we drove to a suitable point to start our walk, we came across several lions, including one sauntering past the park's headquarters and another traversing through the official park campsite. I was glad I wasn't going to be sleeping in one of the campers' flimsy-looking, two-person tents. Leaving the lions behind, we parked the vehicle and set off on foot with our guides, one bearing our tea supplies and the other a gun.

During the rainy season, most of the big game animals move away from the river and into the escarpment. They start

returning to the riverine areas around April as the pans in the bush dry up. As the year progresses, increasingly large herds of elephants and buffaloes are seen, as well as kudu, waterbuck, zebra, impala and more. The last rainy season, however, rainfall had been a sporadic and disappointing. Wildlife was already starting to make an appearance by the river, months earlier than usual, searching for water and food. We spent several hours on foot in the park that morning getting a real taste of its wildness and rugged beauty.

That afternoon we decided on a change of pace and took to canoes. It was the camp's first canoe trip of the season. The shallow waters and unexpected sandbanks, combined with a few detours to avoid territorial hippos, made for a few bursts of adrenaline. A herd of waterbuck, unfazed by our presence, leapt across the channel immediately in front of our canoes, some almost over our heads, heading from the riverbank to a tiny island. As we approached a camp, Boswell, the elephant, suddenly loomed large over us, grazing on an island in the river. Looking up at him from below, we had a very different perspective of this rather enormous elephant. As we drifted past, almost below him, he could easily have reached out with the tip of his trunk and touched us. We ended our canoe trip with spectacular sandbank sundowners. Alighting from the canoes, we were relieved of our paddles and drinks

were pressed firmly into our hands. We sat watching the vibrant colours of the sunset streaking across the water.

The third camp on our itinerary was the brand-new Nyamatusi, and it was here that we felt like we had really landed in the lap of luxury. The camp had only been a few weeks. It's located in an area of the Mana Pools where previously visitors needed a permit to gain access. It's now accessible to camp visitors only. We pretty much had this remote part of the park to ourselves.

From our beds we could see Zambia's Lower Zambezi National Park on the opposite bank. The looming, tree-covered escarpment looked like the folds of a bedspread draped over the legs of a sleeping giant. A morning walk took us very close to a dozing lion. We were rather keen to 'let sleeping lions lie', but a hippo trotting past, heading to the river, startled it out of its slumber it up. Catching a whiff of us on the wind, the lion hastily disappeared from sight. A honeyguide flew overhead and for more than a kilometre persistently endeavoured to get us to follow him, but his repeated attempts were in vain. We saw the wild dogs again, after what had clearly been a successful hunt. They lay resting in the shade, with blood-smeared faces and bloated tummies. We returned to our camp in time for our own lunch and siesta. In a fitting touch of symmetry, having started our trip with elephants, we spent our final afternoon watching

elephants in the distance, patrolling the opposite bank of the river.

On our final night in Mana Pools, rather unexpectedly, the heavens opened and when we woke up the next morning, it was to a world transformed. The clear blue sky had vanished and in its place was mist. It was still drizzling when we walked across to the breakfast area. Birds were singing, celebrating the unexpected moisture. Antelopes were looking damp and slightly bewildered, but had their heads down, happily munching. The last rains in the park had fallen four months earlier, and everyone thought that the rainy season had passed the park by. While the drought conditions had meant it would be a bumper season for predators, with all their prey being concentrated along the river, the rain falling now, when the wet season would normally be coming to a close, could make quite a difference in the park dynamics in the months ahead. For us, though, it meant a very muddy and slippery drive out. The black cotton soil had absorbed the rain like a sponge and seemed reluctant to let us leave, gripping tight to our wheels and sending us skidding and sliding. Giving us one final adventure.

Sarah was hosted at African Bush Camps' three locations in Mana Pools National Park: Kanga Camp, Zambezi Expeditions and their brand-new camp, Nyamatusi. **BBQ**

Sarah Kingdom