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Kafue

High adventure in Zambia

A pioneering itinerary takes travellers across Kafue national park by canoe, Land Rover, hot-air balloon and on foot



Hippos roaming near Shumba Camp as seen from a hot-air balloon

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by: Horatio Clare

If ever I can, I will go back to the Busanga Plains, to the dreaming distances of the grasslands, the clusters of trees like islands and the hot east winds. I made this vow after barely a day in western Zambia, renewing it repeatedly in the following week.

I had come here on an enviable mission — to recce a new itinerary across Kafue National Park in the company of its two architects, tour operator Alex Edwards and

guide Rod Tether. Kafue is slightly larger than Wales but contains only 16 lodges and little other human life. Their idea was to join the dots of those lodges, travelling on foot and by balloon, canoe, boat and Land Rover, from Busanga in the north down to the southern end of Lake Itzhi-tezhi. The point was to see as much of Kafue as possible, getting far closer to its undiscovered wealth of animals, birds and landscapes than a conventional minibus-dependent safari would ever allow.

Kafue belongs to its birds, animals and plants, to its huge skies, its rivers and its seasons. To arrive at the bush airstrip in Busanga is to find a great summer peace where the wild is immense, and humans small, if determined.

“He charged and I got hold of his tusks, one under each arm. He pushed me through a brick wall, then pulled me out again ...” Africa is a nursery of arresting animal-attack stories (thanks to Kafue, I even have a splendid one of my own, involving a hippo, which we will come to). The teller of this one, Daniel Allcock, manager of Shumba Camp, our first stop after Busanga, survived his encounter with the elephant and his ribs have healed (none of his guests come to any such harm). Shumba is made up of luxury huts on stilts. The plain comes right up to your feet when you are in bed. Walkways link the huts; at night we were escorted between them in case we met something big. The reward for such proximity is entrancing.

On the first evening there was the serval, a leopard-like cat that stalked and pounced in an arching leap, hanging in the air, a basketball player wearing golden fur. On our first full day, Sunday, we saw lazing cheetah, and hippo, and elephant browsing the trees, and lion — two yellow-eyed males padding over the plain, oblivious to the thousand puku and lechwe antelope watching them.

“Lion spoor is matted hair and blood,” said Rod. “Hooded vultures eat it, so they’re a sign of lion nearby.” A Zambian of Scottish heritage, he is an expert naturalist and quiet legend of Zambian tourism. He summons birds by imitating their calls; he can practically produce animals. The elephant shrew, which looks like a small hybrid of its names, makes bare patches in the undergrowth a leap apart, allowing it to spring along noiselessly. Spotting the patches, Rod then seemed to conjure the shrew.

And he has never lost a client. We were unscathed by the final day’s hippo incident on the last day but, had we copped it, Rod would have been a great fellow-traveller to the next place. We had seen such sights, too. Our Monday was spent cruising slow sandy tracks, studying antelope grazing in the deepening blush of dawn, and swallows just in from Britain, hunting flies put up by elephant. We watched a huge variety of birds: pratincoles, jacana, wattled cranes; we joined 60 crowned cranes feeding. Always, beyond the last hazy trees of the plain, were paler sketches of treetops, further horizons. We were hoping to explore the sky, too, and on Tuesday we did, in a hot-air balloon. We saw fish eagles and white-backed vultures from above, and hippo just below us like

giant woodlice. And in the basket of the balloon, I glimpsed a much more exciting career than writing. Balloons are addictive.



“I watched *Out of Africa* when I was young and knew what I wanted to do,” explained Denis Hesemans, the pilot. A Belgian Congolese, he runs several balloons in Namibia, basing one at Busanga during the dry season, from May to November, when the game gathers at the watercourses. Denis flies a few feet off the ground, hopping over animals and tree islands.

The islands are originally formed by termites, the architects of this landscape. Trees colonise on them, forming hummocky copses in the dry season, marsh

islands in the wet. Denis and his crew descend on to this scene like a troupe of performing aeronauts. Landings are either “sports” or “extreme sports”, in their parlance — cunningly controlled crashes, basically. Celebratory Champagne is opened with a machete. Denis’s eyes flame with enthusiasm. “Every flight, you look forward to it!”

Racing to launch in the relative stillness of daybreak, slipping the grip of the short grass, then up and travelling with the wind, without wind-noise therefore, and the plains unrolling all around, was utterly bewitching. The feeling of freedom and chance of being at the wind’s behest — wind is *mwela* in Kaonde, the local language — seems to answer the great question of the plains: what can you do with the delight, the near-ache of such sweeping, indifferent beauty? Fly it!

Bearing south, we exchanged the plain for miombo woodland, forests of dark trees, and copper grasses in patches, tough plants somewhere between reeds and straw. Rod reeled off the names of the antelope we passed: reedbuck, kudu, bushbuck, impala, puku, lechwe, roan and duiker. “When they alarm, it is because they have seen or smelled something,” he said. “But their eyesight is not so good on detail, so sometimes it is as though they alarm at the memory of something they’ve glimpsed. When primates alarm, they are looking at whatever it is, because they have hunter’s vision, like us.”

We saw fish eagles and white-backed vultures from above, and hippo just below us like giant woodlice

What might be out there versus what is coming this way become engrossing questions at Musekese Camp that Tuesday night, a collection of comfortable tents and huts on a little rise by the Kafue river. It is the creation of two remarkable young men, Phil Jeffery and Tyrone McKeith, who are going against a widespread Zambian practice by refusing to use fire as a way of managing the land.

Poachers, game wardens, locals, farmers: everybody burns in Zambia, they explain, to encourage fresh growth, to clear vegetation, make animals easier to poach, as defence against ticks and insects and so on. But if you resist it, if you protect a peninsula from fire, as they are, suddenly more birds, animals and insects appear and survive. No one is paying them for their months of hard labour in the heat, creating firebreaks, but they are already seeing more species of birds, bigger herds of herbivores and growing lion prides.

“Small camps are incredibly powerful for protecting parks,” said Phil. “Walks like this are effectively patrols. There were snares and gunshots when we first came, but there’s no poaching now.”

Our walk-patrol at daybreak on Wednesday became a careful and intimate negotiation with the bush, the animals and the wind that carried our scent. Elephant have a near-paranormal power of invisibility. Rod spotted one bull by the curve of his tusk alone, the rest of him blurred to foliage. We tiptoed, conscious that a resort to the rifles of Phil or our ranger escort, Mukendra Cheleka, would represent a disastrous failure of craft. We walk along golden grassy rides, past godlike baobab trees, in the company of birds, many of which can be seen in their names: swallow-tailed bee-eaters, red-billed wood hoopoes, crimson-breasted boubous, emerald-spotted wood doves. And I had never been on a safari where you slept out the heat of the day under a tree.

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In the afternoon we edged into lion territory. Rod glimpsed one turning over. A maned figure sat up suddenly, then flopped again. That night our accommodation was more rudimentary — a “fly camp” consisting of a line of mosquito nets over sleeping bags, close together, near two roosting wood owls. At sunset a martial eagle performed a vertical dive, its feathers humming like a swarm of bees, smited an egret and carried it away. The stars and nightjars came out, we stoked the fire and the lions’ roars silenced the night. Out came the stories.

“We had one camp where white-necked ravens broke into the bookcase and went for Shakespeare. Always Shakespeare!” said Alex Edwards, the third member of our party, a tour

operator for whom this kind of firelight safari represents some of the richest experience his industry offers.

“A hyena nicked my binoculars, then a book on trees, then it ran off with a radio,” countered Rod. “This elephant came and ate the roof of our bedroom, but never when we had clients.”

The puku whistled alarm as a leopard, we thought, passed in the dark behind us. With Mukendra by the fire keeping watch, I slept perfectly, Africa a mighty cradling under my back.

In the morning we took a boat to rendezvous with a Land Rover from Kaingu Lodge, driving south through new landscapes of woodland and stone hills. Rejoining the river lower down, in the centre of the park, we transferred to inflatable canoes. Where the Kafue crosses a granite massif, the river fragments into a flowing maze between stone islands and smooth boulders in piles and tumbles. I never saw a reach more beautiful. Pods of hippo laughed and snorted. Crocodiles, known here as flatdogs, flopped into the current. From our base in the lovely Kaingu Lodge on the bank we explored the rocky river, studying African skimmers, a boldly beautiful bird, and little bee-eaters, and I fished at sundown with pleasure but without success. Friday’s dawn found us looking for Meyer’s Parrots where huge flocks had been seen. Later we made our farewells, and were off, paddling canoes south.

If you found yourself at our final camp, Konkamoya, to be told you had died and this was the next place, you would accept it happily. (Thanks to the backgrounds of the proprietors, this heaven includes Italian cooking.) Here, on the southern shore of Lake Itzhi-tezhi, we watched as a hundred elephant went down to drink at the shore. In nudging family groups they paced, clustered like friends, all ages together. The giant parade grazed side by side and I felt invisible, insubstantial, delighted.

“We are so lucky,” said Andrea Porro, the Milanese owner of Konkamoya, as we sipped sundowners. Rod and I grinned; we were already relishing a lucky day, having cheated death, or been excused it, perhaps, that morning.

In the canoe, around morning coffee time, we had passed another pod of hippo. As we drifted 100 yards downstream, chatting, the canoe suddenly lept up under me like a mighty punch. We were flung into the water. Back on the surface, there was no sign of the bull hippo who had surged out of the depths and chomped through the canoe, biting it just forward of Rod. Conscious of flatdogs, we swam quietly back to retrieve the unpoped part and climbed out.

This should not deter anyone from going to the Kafue, where sensitive policies and dedicated people have created a truly rewarding destination, stunning in its diversity. Canoes are optional, attacks rare. But it was the most invigorating lesson. Here you are not an observer, I felt, as we dried out atop a granite tor, looking down on the river, where nothing but birds seemed to move in hazy miles. If this is a holiday it is also an adventure, Kafue’s great daily adventure, and you are a participant. Only partly thanks

to that hippo, I felt bestowed with extraordinary gifts by Kafue; I still do.

Horatio Clare's 'Down to the Sea in Ships (http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0099526298/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1634&creative=6738&creativeASIN=0099526298&linkCode=as2&tag=finantimes-21)' (Vintage) has been named Stanford Dolman Travel Book of the Year

Details

Horatio Clare was a guest of [Natural High](http://www.naturalhighsafaris.com/). It offers a nine-day trip like the one described from £3,725 per person. Return flights from London with Ethiopian Airways would add about £560 per person

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