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Dream drive

Liuwa Plain and Kasanka National Parks are two of the lesser known destinations in Zambia, but it never fails to amaze. To make it more known, Explore Africa took a group of *Leisure Wheels* clients on a trip last year November, and what an experience it was.

Text and photographs:
Martin Slabbert



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THERE we were, in Liuwa Plain National Park, in Zambia. We were at a viewing spot from where you can watch a colony of bats, waiting for their dramatic departure to feed. A member of the group was in a pensive mood, drinking in every moment of the experience. "You know Martin... you got the advertisement about this trip spot on," said Oom Hendrik. He was referring to the 'wonderful sights, sounds and

experiences,' as advertised. We had been privy to all of the above. And then some. Zambia's Liuwa National Park, situated in the west of the country, hosts the second largest wildebeest migration in the world. There's also the spectacular bat migration in Kasanka. There are numerous ways to reach this proverbial garden of Eden, with a number of road trip options available. From the northern parts of South Africa, the easiest way to reach

Kasane on the Chobe River in Botswana is via the mainstream Groblersbrug Border Post. Kwa Nokeng Lodge, situated in Botswana just after crossing Limpopo River offers camping facilities but there are chalets if you prefer bricks over canvas. If you have some spare time, you can take a three-hour drive to Woodlands Stop-Over and Lodge, 10km north of Francistown, on the route to Nata. This is one of the neatest, well-run campsites in the vicinity. Basic

"And then we saw them: millions and millions of bats as they set off to feed on a local fruit, ripened after the first rains"

EXPLORE AFRICA ADVENTURES

Explore Africa Adventures is a privately owner-managed enterprise that offers self-drive safaris to a wide customer base, mainly to countries north of the Limpopo River. Founded in 1996, we are proud to say that we are the preferred service provider of overland safari to *Leisure Wheels* and *Getaway* magazines. Explore Africa offers safaris to the Liuwa Plain in November, the off-the-beaten track safari to Zambia's remote areas in September and the flagship wildebeest migration in the Serengeti each year in July and August to name a few. Visit our website at www.explore-africa.co.za or contact us on info@explore-africa.co.za.



and clean chalets are available if you don't want to camp but some of the chalets share the neat and clean ablution facilities.

Our favourite venue enroute to Kasane is Elephant Sands, 50km north of Nata. Here you can get so close to elephant, you can almost touch them as they gather around the man-made waterhole. Since there is an outright ban on hunting in Botswana, the owners of the hunting concessions in the eastern part of Botswana do not pump water to lure wildlife to the hunting area, therefore Elephant Sands offers the only available water in a rather large area.

Apart from elephant, you might also see a lion and a hyena coming over for a drink at the watering hole. There are no fences between the animals and the people, of course, which adds to the allure for many of us. This is

one of the reasons I travel Africa: to see and experience African wildlife without any fences.

Another option is to arrive a day earlier and enjoy a game drive in the Chobe National Park, adjacent to the campsite at the lodge. Chobe is known for its large herds of elephant and buffalo.

When the water level is relatively low, hundreds of animals make their way to Sedudu Island, meaning 'pod of hippo' in the local language. An interesting fact about the island is that it lies in the middle of two channels in the Chobe River.

For a long time there was a dispute between Namibia and Botswana about the ownership of the island. After numerous discussions, the two countries ended up at the World Court in The Hague. The court



Border tips - Botswana

Fresh/frozen meat is normally not a problem from south to north, unless there is a threat of foot-and-mouth disease, either in SA or Botswana. No fresh fruit, vegetables and certainly *no* meat products are allowed into Botswana from the other neighbouring countries, neither is the transport of these items allowed from north to south through the country.

When entering Botswana, it is advisable to buy a double entry road permit for around 117 pula. That will save time upon re-entering if you intend to return. You also have to pay insurance at 50 pula and a road fund at 50 pula. The road fund is valid for one year and the insurance valid for three months. If you leave Botswana via the Kazungula ferry, they expect you to fill in (duplicate) a temporary export permit (TEP). The reason for that is that you are leaving the common customs area or CCA as the beaurocracy refers to it. This CCA includes Namibia, Botswana, Swaziland and Lesotho, hence the reason you do not have to 'import' your vehicle to these countries as is the case with Zimbabwe, Zambia and further north.

Border tips - Zambia

The exchange rate between the rand and the Zambian kwacha was ZAR 1 = 0.84 Zkw at the time of writing. Depending at which border post you enter, costs may vary but the same red tape boxes need to be ticked.

The ferry cost at Kazungula can be paid on the ferry: R220, or 150 Zambia kwacha or \$30.

Temporary import permit (TIP) at no fee
Carbon tax per vehicle is typically 200 Zkw
Insurance average at 200 Zkw
Council levy at 30 Zkw
Road tax at \$20

The border officials are not really interested in how much money, food, alcohol or other items you have on your possession. As long as you have paid all the above, they will give you the green light to enter Zambia.

instructed the parties to measure the depth of the western and eastern channels, the deepest one would be the original flow of the Chobe River.

It turned out that the western or top channel was the deepest, therefore Sedudu Island became part of Botswana. They have planted a massive flagpole with a huge Botswana flag flapping about in the wind in the middle of the island to indicate to Namibia the spoils of the dispute, just in case the Namibians forget.

Our safari officially started at Chobe Safari Lodge's campsite on the famous Chobe River. After all the preparations for the upcoming event, we enjoyed yet another one of those 'wowser!' sunsets from the deck of the campsite bar, always a winner.

We entered Zambia the next morning via the Kazungula ferry. The border crossing is time consuming because you have to register and pay a few things... that's just how things works in Africa. Everything takes time.

You start at immigration. Virtually all non-SADEC passport holders require a visa but these will be issued at the counter. After immigration, you need a temporary import permit

(TIP) for your vehicle, third party insurance, road tax (or toll fee as the police refer to it), carbon tax and a council levy. Depending on the size of the group, this might take up to three hours.

After we left the border post, we headed north of Sesheke to pitch camp at Kabula Lodge for the next two days. The campsite has lush green lawns, big shady trees and is situated on the banks of the mighty Zambezi. There is no electricity, but the clean, open-air ablutions and hot showers make up for that.

The following day was an R&R day, as we recovered from the long drive. It was spent on the river to discover the real champs in tiger fishing, which is always great fun. For those who opted to stay in the camp, washing, cleaning, relaxing or a nice brunch kept them busy for a great part of the day.

Leaving Kabula, we headed further north for a quick visit to the Ngonye Falls in the Zambezi, a series of large rapids that, depending on the rainfall, are spectacular in their own right.

Travelling further north via the town of Mongu, we crossed the Barotse Floodplain on a newly built road elevated well above the flood level to enter Liuwa

Park at Kalabo. After finalising the paperwork for our three nights' stay, we crossed the Luanginga River on a hand-drawn ferry.

As we left the ferry, thick sand awaited us; 4x4 low range was the only way to get up the sandbank to carry on with the three-hour *twee-spoor* track to our first overnight campsite.

Liuwa Plain National Park is situated in the western side of Zambia, close to the Angolan border. For many years, Barotseland was the proverbial Cinderella of Zambia. There was little or no development and the beautiful park was left in a bit of a neglected state. This had changed significantly over the past few years.

New roads have been constructed, making access to Liuwa much easier. Some years ago, you needed three days to complete the drive from the border to Liuwa. Today you can do it in one day.

Liuwa was decreed a game reserve of Barotseland by the king, Lewanike in the 1880s. Historically, it was used as a royal hunting ground and, as such, was protected by the local Lozi people. Up until today, one of the landmarks in the park is called King's Camp, referring to the campsite that the king used as a base for his hunting expeditions, complete with a freshwater well.

Liuwa consists of large grassy plains, hence the name, but in between these large plains there are so-called 'tree islands'. All the campsites in the park are situated in these tree islands.

It is indeed a beautiful place, is Liuwa. From open, vast plains to thick bush; not to mention the prolific wild- and birdlife.

After setting up the camp and getting a large campfire going, we enjoyed another sunset, this time over the vast plains of Liuwa, relaxing and reflecting on the day gone past. One of the exciting issues to deal with (apart from a cold water shower) is the resident hyena that passed through the campsite every now and then to see what was on offer.

Some find it scary, others intimidating and some just enjoy the wild side of Africa. The campsites are rustic, water is pumped by means of a foot



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pump from a well, therefore, no hot water and, obviously, no electricity.

The great drawcard for visitors is the annual migration of the zebra and wildebeest from the northern part of Zambia to the south. The actual timing of the migration depends on the rainfall: if the rain comes relatively early in November, it's game on, if you'll excuse the pun.

Thousands of wildebeest and zebra migrate south in search of greener pastures. Traditionally, the local Lozi people burn the grassy plains in the dry season in order to promote new growth in the rainy season, and that is exactly why the migration takes place as soon as the first rains cause the grass to form new sprouts.

Another drawcard for visitors to Liuwa used to be Lady Liuwa, the only surviving lion cub of her pride after the turmoil, poaching and trophy hunting that occurred during the Angolan war. Unfortunately, she passed away due to natural causes last year.

Liuwa is also a haven for birders due to the abundance of birdlife surrounding the many pans that fill up between November and April of each

year. Storks, cranes and other waterbirds are aplenty, so is the near threatened black-winged pratincole that visits in their tens of thousands each year. Other wildlife include oribi and lion.

After our three-night stay, we left the park and headed for another campsite on the banks of the Kafue River, an overnight stop en route to Kasanka National Park. The next adventure was waiting for us at Kasanka, the migration of millions of straw-coloured fruit bats.

This is the largest mammal migration on the planet. That's right... in the world. Situated in the central province close to the town of Serenje and roughly 390 square kilometres in size, Kasanka is one of the smallest national parks in Zambia, and interestingly, the first park in Zambia to be privately managed by the Kasanka Trust.

The bats arrive from October and by the middle of November, reach their highest number of between 8–10 million in one of the last remaining few hectares of mushitu (indigenous forest).

These are the bats we had been waiting for when Oom Hendrik made his remark.

And then we saw them:

millions and millions of bats as they set off to feed on a local fruit, ripened after the first rains. It is said that they forage for food in a radius up to 70km from their roosting location.

They feed on many local fruit and berry species such as water berry and masuku, a wild loquat. For the brave, you can wake up at 4am to experience the bats when they come back to the forest to settle for the day.

Curiously, the bats takes off in an easterly direction and arrive in the morning from the west. This explain why the numerous photos you will see of the bat migration are almost always with the setting sun behind them. With the arrival of the bats, so too, come the many scavengers and predators that follow them. Martial eagles, fish eagles, African hack-eagles, kites, vultures and falcons.

Also on offer are guided tours to hides closer to the roosting area to experience the bats up close. Kasanka is home to the rarely spotted and shy sitatunga (*Tragelaphus spekii*), also known in Afrikaans as a waterkoedoe.

The campsites were rustic with flushing toilets and the camp attendants supplied hot water from the stream below.



Another great treat is the appearance of large mushrooms that can be bought along the road, some the size of a small car's tyre. Another local delicacy is the masuku fruit. It has a thick skin and, when peeled, reveals three to four pips inside similar to the flesh you will find in a litchi, but tastes something between a mango and a peach, extremely tasty.

After our two-night stay at this campsite, it was time to say goodbye. Our next stop was the Eureka campsite on the southern side of Lusaka, a handy and comfortable stopover on our way to Livingstone. Although Livingstone was our final official destination, we still had great fun visiting the famous Victoria Falls.



Some members of the group took a microlight flight over the falls, while others visited the Royal Livingstone hotel, even if it was only to get back in touch with civilisation, or maybe enjoy a double on the rocks overlooking the mighty Zambezi from the sunset deck.

This year, the migration safari will take place from 20 November to 1 December. For more information, you can contact the *Leisure Wheels* Travel desk at lwtravel@ramsaymedia.co.za or phone Explore Africa at +27 80 904 3819. **lw**