



Lions are the dominant predators in the Lower Zambezi National Park



African jacana resting

LOWER ZAMBEZI NATIONAL PARK

The Zambezi Valley is a huge rift in the earth's crust, through which a mighty river flows. Over millennia, mineral-rich volcanic soils deposited by the Zambezi River have nurtured lush vegetation, while old meanders and ox-bow lakes add to the attraction for wildlife.

There are national parks on both sides of the river – Mana Pools National Park on the Zimbabwean bank (see page 87) and the Lower Zambezi National Park on the Zambian side. The landscape is beautiful: tall leadwood, ebony, winterthorn and fig trees stand on a carpet of rich grassland. But the main attraction is the area's game, which congregates near the river during the dry season.

Buffalo graze on islands, often swimming between them, while impala are everywhere and kudu, eland, waterbuck, bushbuck, zebra and grysbok are common. The area is notable for its huge old bull elephants, which are often very relaxed individuals. Most of the camps here count elephants as very regular visitors, especially towards the end of the dry season – so particular care must be taken when you're walking around, even during the day!

Leopard, wild dog and spotted hyena are the major predators, with some unusually large prides of lion. The birdlife is rich – 378 species have been recorded here at the last count, including many species of eagle, kingfisher, heron, stork and bee-eater.

Overlooking the park from its western boundary, where the escarpment is close to the river, **Chongwe River Camp** is run by its owner, Chris Liebenberg. In many ways, Chongwe is the valley's rising star. Chris and his enthusiastic team have gradually built up the camp over the years. Chongwe now has eight fairly traditional, walk-in tents, shaded by thatched roofs.

Each has its own large, open-air bathroom – complete with hot showers, flush toilets and lots of river stones incorporated into the walls. Private verandas overlook the river and many of the room's fittings are made from natural pieces of wood found locally, lending plenty of character.

At the south end of the camp, the new **Albida suite** is very different in style and is usually used as an exclusive suite for up to four people; it has been architect-designed in a contemporary, bedouin style, though with similarities to *Chongwe River House*



Walking safaris in Zambia are always led by a professional guide and an armed game scout

(see below). It has a luxurious, open-plan lounge and dining area, complete with a resident butler and a private plunge pool – all right beside the Zambezi. Around this, naturally curved adobe walls are embedded with wood to give an organic feel. Either side of the central lounge are two large, octagonal bedroom tents, the front walls of which are floor-to-ceiling gauze doors. Each has a huge, en-suite bathroom which is shaded by a canvas roof but open to the bush. All in all, two very glamorous and original safari tents!

Following in the footsteps of the Albida suite, new for 2009 is the **Cassia suite**. Built along the same lines as the Albida, this is a single suite situated right on the confluence of the Chongwe and the Zambezi rivers. It's perfect for honeymoon couples as it offers lots of privacy. The suite has an octagonal main tent with a king-size bed, an en-suite bathroom and a separate living area overlooking a private plunge-pool. This suite also has a dining area, for guests who want to have private meals.

Run by the same team as Chongwe, the contrasting **Bushbuck Camp** is a small, rustic bushcamp which stands on a hillside overlooking the Chongwe River. Lit by storm lanterns, the camp focuses on walking safaris, and welcomes a maximum of six guests with a sense of adventure. The tents are small, walk-in tents with two beds,



Hippo mother and calf on a sandbank in the middle of the Zambezi River



Back to safari basics: one of the delightfully open bush chalets at Old Mondoro

a bedside table and an en-suite bathroom with flush toilets and bucket showers.

The amazing **Chongwe River House** is an architect's fantasy of 'Flintstonian' luxury in the bush. Entirely natural, and wholly original in character, it's ideal for families and small groups (like the *Luangwa Safari House*, on page 76), with four huge en-suite bedrooms, a private safari guide, vehicle and chef – and spectacular views of the Zambezi.

Inside the national park, the family-owned **Chiawa Camp** is right beside the Zambezi. Each of its eight tents stands on a raised wooden platform. Seven of these are 'Superior tents' – large and lovely rooms, featuring comfortable sofas and armchairs. The sumptuous king-size bed can also be converted into two twin beds. All have spacious bathrooms with a claw-foot bath and indoor and outdoor shower, one of which is even set inside a tree. The eighth tent is a two-bedroom tented suite ideal for families and friends. Chiawa takes pride in its conservation ethos, great guiding, top-notch food, superb game and a highly professional team. Activities here are particularly flexible, and include walking safaris, day and night game drives, canoeing, boat trips and fishing (all catch and release).

Deeper into the park, **Sausage Tree Camp** has just six comfortable, white, Bedouin-



Elephants are frequent guests at the camps in the Lower Zambezi

style tents plus two brand-new honeymoon suites and a lovely swimming pool; all stand beside the confluence of the picturesque Chifungulu Channel and the Zambezi. These are big, fairly stylish and original rooms which include a canopied king-size bed (or twin beds) and open-air bathrooms, complete with a flush toilet, shower and bath with a view. Sausage Tree's food is first-class, thanks to her chef, the loquacious Honore Kabongo. Their flexible activities are run by excellent guides and include walking safaris, drives, canoe trips, fishing and river cruises.

If you head deep to the east of the national park, there's a lovely area that's comparatively unexplored. Much of this is particularly beautiful winterthorn woodland where extensive stands of these tall, old trees provide a shady canopy. There is very little undergrowth in these woodlands, making them particularly good for walking.

On the edge of this, **Old Mondoro** makes a perfect combination with Chiawa or Sausage Tree Camp, or a rustic alternative in its own right. Beside the river, giant winterthorn trees shade the four small,

simple bush chalets, which each have beds, mosquito nets and simple en-suite bathrooms, with a bucket shower and flush toilet. These are amazingly open; the lower halves of the walls are made of reed, whilst the upper halves are open, with canvas flaps that roll down to cover them at night.

Elephants frequently wander through camp, which is lit by oil lamps at night (there's no electricity here), and there's little human presence in this area – all of which reinforce the feeling that Old Mondoro is a true bushcamp and an ideal base for those who want to immerse themselves in the wilderness.

In the heart of this area, **Kulefu Camp** is an old camp that we've known for years. It was recently rebuilt to high standards, and reopened in late 2008. It's a smart camp with seven spacious tented rooms, each with an en-suite bathroom and private veranda. The main bar, lounge and dining room area are housed in a Bedouin-style tent and there is a plunge pool and a deck overlooking the river. Activities here include 4WD day and night game drives, walking safaris, and trips using canoes and larger boats.



Crocodiles never stop growing



Buffalo mother and calf