

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 oxbow 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 pages 158–159) 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 regular visitors, especially towards the end of the dry season – so particular care must be taken when you're walking around camp, even during the day!

Leopard, wild dog and hyena are the major predators, with some unusually large prides of lion. The birdlife is rich – 380 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**. Chris and his enthusiastic team have gradually built up the camp over the years and it now has eight fairly traditional, recently refurbished walk-in tents, shaded under a pretty grove of winterthorn trees.

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 Chongwe River, a tributary of the Zambezi, and the rooms are lent plenty of character

from fittings made of locally found wood and antelope horns.

At the south end of the camp, the **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, with similarities to the beautiful Chongwe River House (page 123). It has a luxurious, open-plan lounge and dining area, complete with a resident butler and a private plunge pool – literally right beside the Chongwe. Around this, naturally curved adobe walls are embedded with wood to give an organic feel. Either side of the central lounge are



Hippos usually graze at night, but can be seen out of the water during the day as well



The Zambezi River is perfect for fishing

two large, octagonal bedroom tents, the 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 is the **Cassia suite**. Built in 2008 this is designed along the same lines as the Albida, and 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.

Open since 2010, the simple **Tsika Island Camp** is situated on a small island 35km upstream from Chongwe and accommodates guests in just three adobe-and-thatch huts. Reached by canoe or boat, the camp also offers visits to the nearby Mugurumenu village and its school as part of a community tourism initiative. A stay at Tsika will combine well with Chongwe or Kasaka.



Elephants are frequent guests at the camps in Lower Zambezi



Juvenile giant eagle owl

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 126), with four huge en-suite bedrooms, a private safari guide, vehicle and chef – and a spectacular setting on the Chongwe River.

Four kilometres west of the park, above the Zambezi in the Chiawa Game Management Area, stands the family-friendly **Kasaka River Lodge**. It's had a chequered history, but benefitted by being taken over by the team behind Chongwe River Camp in 2010. Kasaka has eight reasonably spacious en-suite safari tents, four of them set among lawns near the pool, and the others on the more secluded 'wild' side. Kasaka's substantial main lounge/dining deck is elevated and shaded under a canopy of tamarind trees whilst below, a second lounge area with small library is built into the banks of the river.

For even greater privacy, the **Hippo Pod** is really a separate private camp, with just two tents set around a shared lounge, dining area, swimming pool and deck. It is particularly good for families, who will especially appreciate a private 4WD and guide.

Inside the national park, the family-owned **Chiawa Camp** is right beside the Zambezi. Each of its nine large and lovely tents features comfortable sofas and armchairs, and stands on a raised wooden platform. The sumptuous king-size bed can also be converted into two twin beds, and there are spacious bathrooms with his and hers washbasins and a claw-foot bath. All tents have an indoor shower and some have an

outdoor shower as well. The newly built, beautiful honeymoon tent has a private viewing deck and outdoor bathroom. Chiawa takes particular pride in its conservation ethos, great guiding, top-notch food, superb game and a highly professional team. Activities here are especially flexible, and include walking safaris, day and night game drives, canoeing, boat trips and fishing (all catch and release).

In the heart of the park, **Sausage Tree Camp** has five comfortable chalets under white canvas roofs, two honeymoon suites with private pools and a smart two-roomed house. These are spacious, stylish and original rooms which include a canopied king-size bed (or twin beds) and open-air bathrooms, complete with a shower and flush toilet with a view. A swimming pool, dining room and campfire overlook the confluence of the picturesque Chifungulu Channel and the Zambezi. Sausage Tree's food is first class and their flexible activities (walking safaris, drives, canoe trips, fishing and river cruises) are run by excellent guides.

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** is perfect in combination with Chiawa Camp, its more sophisticated big brother, or a more intimate alternative in its own right. Beside the Zambezi River, giant winterthorn trees shade the four attractive bush chalets,



Leopards are usually solitary and can often be found resting in the shade

which all have wide verandas, a king-size or two single beds, mosquito nets and en-suite bathrooms, complete with a flush toilet, washbasin, outdoor shower and bath. These are amazingly open; the lower halves of the walls are made of reed, whilst the upper halves are only covered by near transparent gauze. (Canvas flaps can roll down to cover them at night.)

Elephants frequently wander through camp, which is lit by twinkling oil lamps at night (although each room has discreet electric lights), 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 rebuilt to high standards, reopened in late 2008, but closed in 2011 due to flooding. It should re-open again in 2012 as a smart, contemporary camp with seven spacious tented rooms, each with an en-suite bathroom, outdoor shower 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 motorised boats, as well as fishing.



An early breakfast at Chongwe, on the banks of the Zambezi River



Lion can climb trees too!