

THE LUANGWA VALLEY

The lush Luangwa Valley, enclosed by steep escarpment walls, is one of the African continent's finest wildlife areas. The game in the majestic woodlands surrounding the Luangwa River was recognised as remarkable by the first settlers and in 1904 it became an officially protected area. Now, the North and South Luangwa national parks conserve most of the valley, complete with oxbow lakes and abandoned watercourses, as well as the more densely wooded areas reaching north and west.

Here, you can find huge herds of elephant and buffalo, hundreds of animals strong, which are particularly spectacular if encountered whilst on foot. Impala and puku are prolific, while bushbuck, eland and kudu are often seen. Of particular interest are three unique subspecies: the beautiful Thornicroft's giraffe, with its dark patterned skin, Crawshay's zebra and Cookson's wildebeest. The main predators are lion, leopard and spotted hyena, though wild dogs are occasionally seen, most often in the south.

SOUTH LUANGWA NATIONAL PARK

There are several world-class safari camps, with excellent mobile and fly-camping options, in the South Luangwa. As well as exciting walks and drives with first-class guides, you can also rely on the camps for superb food and hospitality. As all the camps are slightly different in character, please call our team for an in-depth chat about them. We know them from personal experience, and can help you decide which would suit you best.

NORMAN CARR SAFARIS

Founded by the late, legendary conservationist, Norman Carr, this reliable operation consists of the famous Kapani Lodge and four small 'satellite' bushcamps – Luwi, Nsolo, Kakuli and Mchenja. A safari of a week or more, starting with Kapani and then walking or driving between the bushcamps, makes a lovely trip (see the *Aardvark Safari* on page 138).

Kapani Lodge has an established feel and nine rooms which are spacious, light and airy. Each has solid wooden furniture, en-suite shower and toilet, 24-hour electricity, blissful ceiling fans (welcome relief in the valley's heat) and a fridge. One of these is **Lagoon House** – a huge honeymoon suite that commands a supplement. Kapani serves excellent food, usually on their beautiful wooden deck overlooking the lagoon. It is a comfortable camp with a sizeable swimming pool, offering 4WD safaris and guided walks.

Furthest from Kapani, the remote **Luwi Bushcamp** has four reed-and-thatch chalets with en-suite bathrooms. It stands near a permanent lagoon that is home to a large pod of hippos. **Nsolo Bushcamp** is 10km down the normally dry Luwi River, and has four beautifully designed chalets raised up on decks and open at the front. Each has an en-suite outdoor shower and a flush toilet. At both Luwi and Nsolo you'll dine under the stars and spend your days on walking safaris in the bush.

If you're feeling really adventurous, then you should try one of the **Luwi River sleep-outs**, which allows travellers to sleep under just a mosquito net in the sandy riverbed beside a campfire for a night. Guests are cared for by a senior guide, an armed scout, a chef and a camp assistant.



South Luangwa is superb for walking and all camps offer it as an activity – some only do walking!

Kakuli was rebuilt in early 2008, and stands in a lovely elevated spot beside the Luangwa. It has four walk-in canvas tents, each with a spacious bathroom complete with dressing area, en-suite shower and flush toilet. On an elevated deck overlooking a grassy dambo, there's a central thatched area with a small bar, dining table and sitting area with a bookcase of wildlife books.

Mchenja stands in a serenely beautiful grove of ebony trees beside the Luangwa – one of the park's best locations. In this cool shade you'll find five stylish octagonal tents, under thatch, with en-suite bathrooms including an indoor claw-foot bath, an outdoor shower and flush toilet. The central thatched area has a plunge pool.

Kakuli and Mchenja offer a mix of walking safaris and 4WD game drives; Luwi concentrates on walking safaris, as does Nsolo, which also offers short night drives. Kakuli Camp also opens in the green season (February to March) for guided walks and river safaris from Kapani Lodge (open year round).

REMOTE AFRICA SAFARIS

Home to John and Carol Coppinger, **Tafika** is one of this park's last truly owner-run camps. Standing on the banks of the Luangwa River, near the beautiful Nsefu area, it's a small safari camp with an authentic feel.

Four of Tafika's large reed-and-thatch chalets have two double beds; the fifth has two rooms, one with a king-size bed and the other with two double beds; and the sixth is a stunning honeymoon suite. All have mosquito nets and en-suite facilities, including a flush toilet, washbasin, and excellent shower open to the skies. Lighting is by efficient, battery-powered lights and traditional storm lanterns. Fabulous dinners are a relaxed affair, eaten together and often outside at circular tables.

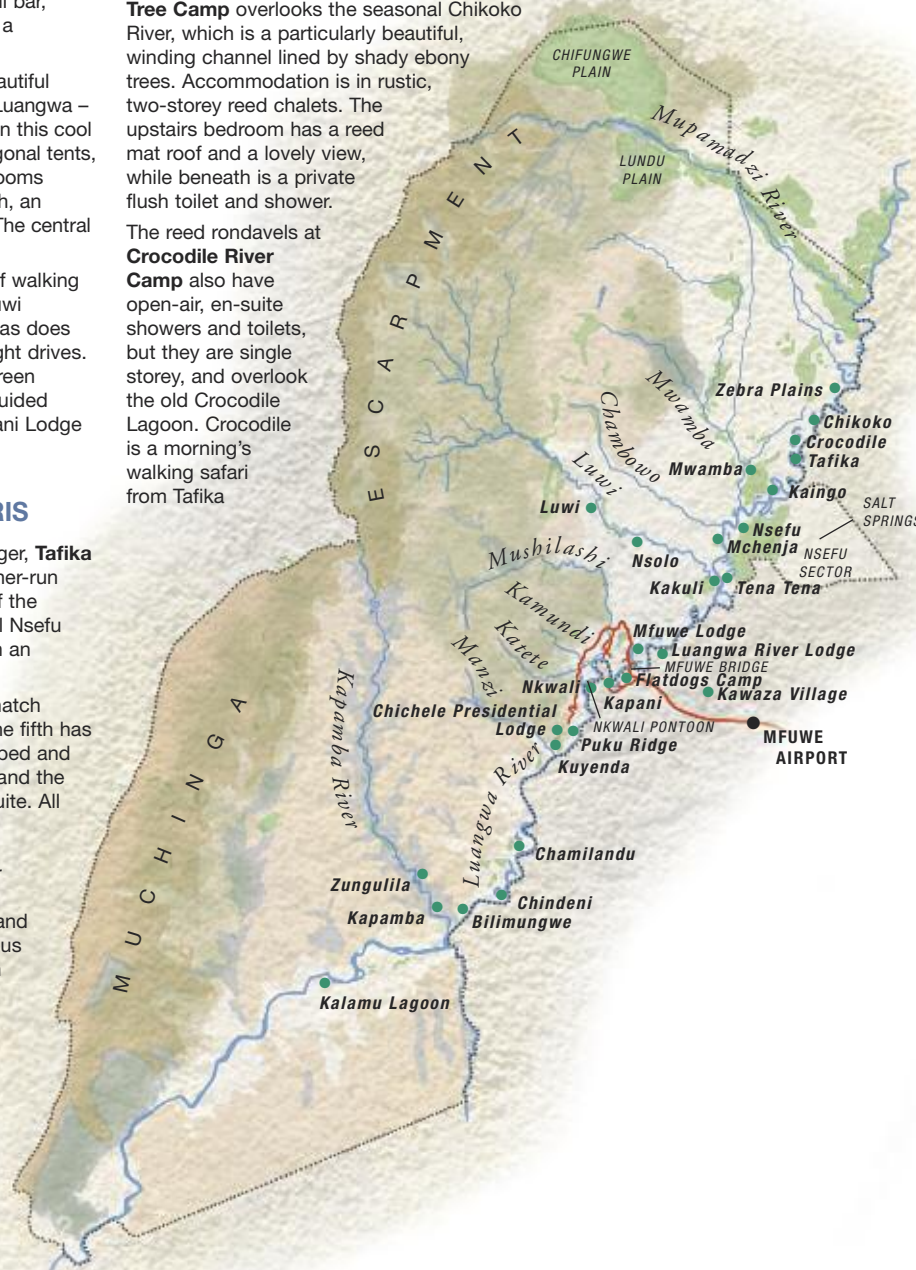
Tafika is unpretentious, yet has some of the most experienced guides in the valley – resulting in first-class walking safaris. The 4WD vehicles have just two rows of seats, and drives are usually limited to four guests per vehicle. Add in short mountain-bike rides, engaging visits to the

village school that the camp supports and (for an extra cost) dawn microlight flights to make a flexible programme of very high-quality options.

Tafika has two satellite walking bushcamps, in a wilderness area with no roads; both take a maximum of six walkers. **Chikoko Tree Camp** overlooks the seasonal Chikoko River, which is a particularly beautiful, winding channel lined by shady ebony trees. Accommodation is in rustic, two-storey reed chalets. The upstairs bedroom has a reed mat roof and a lovely view, while beneath is a private flush toilet and shower.

The reed rondavels at **Crocodile River Camp** also have open-air, en-suite showers and toilets, but they are single storey, and overlook the old Crocodile Lagoon. Crocodile is a morning's walking safari from Tafika

or Chikoko. We recommend at least five or six nights on a walking safari between the bushcamps, or – for a longer stay – these camps combine well with Tafika and Mwaleshi, their sister camp in North Luangwa (eg: see the *Giraffe Safari*, on page 138).



Getting a bird's-eye view of the Luangwa

Luangwa by Microlight

John Coppinger keeps a microlight at Tafika and short flights over the park can often be arranged (about US\$130 for 15 minutes) during your stay. A dawn flight, whilst the sun is rising, is breathtaking and you can pinpoint game to investigate on the morning's walk or drive.

Reviews online

There's no better way to research your trip than looking at our website. We don't edit any of our travellers reviews, and you'll find many such reviews for most of the Luangwa's camps. So read the experiences of our recent travellers by going to www.expertafrica.com



Elephants preparing to cross the Luangwa River

ROBIN POPE SAFARIS

Perhaps the Luangwa Valley's best-known name is that of *Robin Pope Safaris* (alias *RPS*), who run top-class camps and a variety of walking safaris.

Nkwali stands a few kilometres southwest of Mfuwe, overlooking the Luangwa River from beneath tall mahogany and ebony trees. The camp has five rooms and a two-roomed cottage, each with a thatched roof, bamboo walls, and twin or king-size beds surrounded by a large mosquito net. They're all large and stylish, with an en-suite toilet and shower in an open-sided bathroom. The camp's swimming pool is particularly welcome when it's hot.

Adjacent to Nkwali, **Robin's House** is a private two-bedroom house (a double room and a triple, with two bathrooms). It's self-contained, with a plunge pool, kitchen, chef, valet, hostess and a private game-viewing vehicle and guide. This allows families or small groups to be completely flexible, setting their own schedule for each day and changing it at will!

Also nearby is the spectacular **Luangwa Safari House**: a luxurious four-bedroom house in a great location, overlooking a

waterhole. It has been designed with originality in mind – complete with a plunge pool and deck. Like Robin's House, it is self-contained and staffed, including a private safari guide and game-viewing vehicle.

Beside the Luangwa, a little north of the park's central area, **Luangwa River Camp** was built in 2001 – a process which was the subject of a BBC TV fly-on-the-wall documentary, 'No Going Back' – but joined the RPS portfolio in late 2011. The camp looks out over the Luangwa River to the national park and has just five contemporary en-suite bedrooms, each with a sunken bath and private viewing deck, while the substantial main building has a good pool. Activities focus on day and night game drives and walking safaris, with river trips when the water is high enough, and there is the option of various cultural trips – and even holistic massages.

RPS also has two bush camps in the remote Nsefu Sector of the park, a few hours' drive further north. **Tena Tena** has five large tents. In each a 'dressing room' separates the tent from the en-suite shower and toilet, which are open to the stars. One side of these comfortable tents can be

rolled up during the day to watch a busy waterhole. The honeymoon suite has a king-size bed and a separate sitting area. The camp has a dining area, an open bar and a small library.

Built in the early 1950s, **Nsefu** is the Luangwa's oldest camp. Extensively renovated a few years ago, it has six brick-and-stone rondavels furnished with understated elegance, in harmony with the surrounding bush. Each has a veranda at the front and en-suite shower and toilet at the back. Nsefu's bar area is set beside a huge termite mound, commanding a spectacular view of a wide bend in the river and a lush lagoon.

With advance notice, it's possible to go **bush camping** for one or two nights in this area. This involves a walking safari by day and an overnight stay in a simple camp: a small walk-in tent, a hot bucket shower and a long-drop toilet. A safari guide, camp assistant and a chef come along to raise the experience to a magical one!

RPS also organises scheduled **Mobile walking safaris**; see *Robin Pope Walking Safari* (page 139) for more information, then call us, or see www.wildaboutafrica.com for departure dates.



Egyptian goose

SHENTON SAFARIS

Shenton Safaris is a small, owner-run operation with two excellent camps and a number of photographic hides. These trademark hides include the raised 'Elephant hide', located above an elephant crossing point in the Luangwa River; the subterranean 'Hippo hide' originally built for a BBC film crew, set into the riverbank overlooking a pod of hippos, with a 'Mini-hide' reaching right down to the edge of the water; the 'Last waterhole hide', which often attracts the Mwamba lion pride; and a floating 'Carmine hide' during the nesting season of these vibrant bee-eaters. All are great for photographers and wildlife enthusiasts, while romantics can arrange to sleep overnight in the Elephant hide which is a magical experience under the stars.

Kaingo Camp is a first-class safari camp overlooking the Luangwa from beneath an old grove of mahogany and ebony trees. Here, Derek and Jules Shenton and their team, offer six chalets and a relaxed camp ambience. These newly refurbished brick-and-thatch chalets are elegantly furnished and have an en-suite shower/toilet. They also feature skylights above the beds, deep outdoor baths and private viewing decks looking out over the river.

The main lounge and dining area has an amazing bar made from a huge trunk of leadwood. At the base of the riverbank, a stilted deck is a great game-viewing spot for afternoon tea. Activities include walks, 4WD safaris (day and night) and trips to the hides.

A morning's walk from Kaingo, **Mwamba Bushcamp** overlooks a productive waterhole in the bed of the seasonal Mwamba River. It's a small camp with only three bijoux reed-and-thatch chalets, each with large double or twin beds, skylights, and huge en-suite open-air bathrooms. This is an intimate little camp where dining is usually al fresco under the trees.

Drives and visits to the hides are available, as well as walking safaris through the mopane forests, ebony groves and grasslands nearby. Adventurous travellers might consider a **Mwamba Camp Out**: a night in a simple fly-camp overlooking a waterhole. Only an afternoon's walk away from the main camp, you'll be accompanied by a guide and an armed scout, and then enjoy dinner around the campfire on a memorable night in the bush.

THE BUSHCAMP COMPANY

Mfuwe Lagoon, a huge oxbow lake in the middle of one of the Luangwa's most popular areas for game, is overlooked by **Mfuwe Lodge** – the *Bushcamp Company's* flagship property. Larger than most other safari lodges in the valley, Mfuwe underwent a complete refurbishment in 2010 and it is now a very stylish and contemporary property. The lodge is dominated by a vast thatched roof which shelters its open dining area, bar and lounge. There's also a superb library full of fascinating archives to explore.

South of Mfuwe, away from most other camps, are the rest of Bushcamp's properties – comprising six small safari bushcamps. Of these, **Kuyenda** is the simplest, with traditional reed-and-thatch rondavels, and en-suite showers and toilets. It's a classic bushcamp, notable for the top reputation of its main guide, Phil Berry, and his charming partner, Babette. Great food, sparkling conversation and wonderful walks in stunning surroundings are de rigueur.

Chamilandu is one of the Luangwa's most luxurious, well-furnished bushcamps. Its three chalets are raised on high timber platforms above the Luangwa's banks. These have sweeping views of the river and the Chindeni Hills beyond, and are fitted out with sculpted wooden furniture and natural fabrics.

Nearby, **Chindeni** is equally stylish, with four large and impressive tents complete with big writing desks and hammocks on a wooden veranda. There's an open-sided central dining/bar area on wooden decking, overlooking a permanent lagoon.

Completely rebuilt in 2011, **Bilimungwe** has a central open-sided bar/dining area raised on wooden decking around the trunks of huge mahogany trees. Here four huge thatched chalets, two double and two twin bedded, are made of cane and reeds. Each overlooks a series of waterholes and has an en-suite toilet and twin washbasins, and an ingenious outside shower. Fireside

Perekani Walking Trail

For an adventurous walking safari, combining five varied camps in a great game area, we can arrange for you to start at Tafika, and then walk to Chikoko Tree Camp and on to Crocodile River Camp. Transfer by road and boat to Mwamba Bushcamp and end by walking to Kaingo. This works best as a ten-night safari; see the *Perekani Walking Trail* on page 139 for full details.



Luangwa leopard guarding its recent kill

dining at 'Joe's Bistro' is a great hit.

In the far south of the park, **Kapamba** has the air of a pioneering safari camp. Its four stylish stone chalets, all with modern, moulded interiors, are open-fronted and overlook the conveniently shallow Kapamba River. Their en-suite bathrooms include huge sunken baths beneath twin showers. Walking safaris ending with a sundown paddle along the clear river are highly recommended. Kapamba also opens in the green season (November and December).

Finally, in a remote area near Kapamba, **Zungulila Camp** has just four large colonial-style tents, each with an en-suite bathroom, outdoor shower, plunge pool and private deck. Open from July to December, the camp overlooks a wide bend in the Kapamba River.

Daily schedules at these bushcamps usually begin with a morning walking safari and end with an afternoon and night game drive. Each camp has a single resident guide, and all the camp's guests join in the same activity at the same time. Staying at a combination of these camps and walking between some of them is possible and often a highlight.



The rustic outside lounge at Mwamba Bushcamp sits beneath shady ebony trees

WILDERNESS SAFARIS

Well known for their top safari camps in Botswana and Namibia, *Wilderness Safaris* opened their first camp in South Luangwa in May 2007. **Kalamu Lagoon Camp** is situated in the Luamfwa Concession, in the south of the National Park, and is usually reached via its own private airstrip. It has eight en suite reed-and-canvas tents, each with both an indoor and outdoor shower. The camp stands beside a permanent lagoon just off the Luangwa River, and there are views of this from the pool and viewing deck, as well as the dining room and bar area, which are shaded by tall ebonny trees.

A few small hides in the concession offer good photographic opportunities, but to stay out of camp longer, consider a night or two in the **Kalamu Star-bed Camp**. This consists of three separate wooden platforms, each raised about ten feet off the ground, and each used as a base for a mattress and mosquito net. Although the stars form your roof, you'll still find a private

bathroom with hot-and-cold running water here – whilst very tasty meals are served around the campfire.

SANCTUARY LODGES

South of Mfuwe, on the top of Chichele Hill, **Chichele Presidential Lodge** has arguably the best views in the Luangwa Valley. In 1972 it was built as the holiday home for the then Zambian President: Kenneth Kaunda. More recently it lay unused for a while, before being taken over and refurbished by *Sanctuary Lodges*. After a grand re-opening, by Kaunda himself in April 2011, Chichele is now a safari lodge with wide sweeping verandas, sumptuous furnishings, the occasional antique and a lovely swimming pool. Its ten spacious air-conditioned suites have four-poster beds, claw foot baths and a distinct colonial style.

Very nearby, overlooking Kakumbi floodplain, Chichele's sister-camp, **Puku Ridge Camp** has seven smart, luxury tents, each with an en-suite bathroom and private

deck overlooking a flood-lit waterhole. Contemporary design features throughout, but is especially evident in the variety of fun seating areas near the dining room and bar. Activities include 4WD game drives (day and night) and walking safaris.

The new **Zebra Plains** is a seasonal camp (open June to October) offering walking safaris in the far north-west of the park – an area that we visited for walking as early as 1995. It is perched on a sandbank beside the Luangwa River, overlooking a hippo pod. The camp accommodates a maximum of six guests in four large traditional safari tents, each with double or twin beds hung with mosquito nets, and an en-suite bathroom with an open-air bucket shower. A main mess tent houses a small library, bar and dining area, although meals are often served outside.

FLATDOGS CAMP

Based just outside the main gate to South Luangwa, **Flatdogs Camp** started catering to low-cost campers and backpackers in 2000. In the last 11 years it has changed enormously; its campsite has closed and it has evolved into a comfortable safari camp offering good food, good guides and an affordable way to safari in South Luangwa National Park. Flatdogs is one of the valley's larger camps, with eight chalets set within four two-storey buildings, six luxury tents overlooking the Luangwa, six fairly small 'standard' tents and the lovely Jackalberry Tree House, which is set on a raised wooden deck overlooking a floodplain.

Most of the Luangwa's safari camps include all meals, activities and drinks, and look after their visitors like personal guests at a house-party. The guides and managers actively 'host' the guests for drinks and meals, giving a great chance for travellers to interact and chat about things like the activities, the country, the wildlife and the park. Flatdogs, however, is different. You're not hosted but instead take your meals independently (most eat in the à la carte restaurant) and as a result there is less interaction between the guests and the camp team. Drinks are an additional cost and you can even opt to book accommodation only, paying for meals and activities locally. This flexibility, combined with Flatdogs' size and its less visible service, makes it one of the most affordable safari camps in South Luangwa.

A herd of endemic Thornicroft's giraffe crossing the Luangwa River



MOBILE WALKING SAFARIS

In the half-light of dawn, you sit holding a mug of hot coffee beside the glowing embers of the campfire. Slowly, the sun rises and the sky turns pink. Around you the bush is alive with sounds – leaves rustle, branches break and a baboon barks in alarm. Then, as soft light banishes the shadows, you gather your binoculars and camera for a morning walk.

A walking safari is totally different to game viewing from a vehicle – and it is not for everyone. If you want to ‘tick off’ big-game animals, photograph them from close quarters, and swiftly go from one large herd of game to the other, then walking is not for you.

You cannot approach animals as closely, or as easily, on foot as you can in a vehicle – but we guarantee you will learn more. There are no noises except you and the wildlife, so everything you hear must be an animal, a bird or an insect. With time, patience and a good guide, you can learn to interpret the sounds and secrets of the bush. You’ll smell the presence of elephants, perhaps follow the honey-guide bird and learn about animals from their tracks.

A walking safari brings the African bush to life; it’s a sharp, spine-tingling experience that’s addictive and hard to beat. Watching game from a vehicle will never be the same again!

Many of the smaller camps in the Luangwa offer excellent walking safaris and for this reason many of our trip ideas include time at these.

Robin Pope Safaris (see page 126) has a wide range of walking safaris, including their famous ‘walking mobiles’, run in the far north of South Luangwa National Park. These use simple **Walking Mobile Camps**, which have walk-in tents, hot bucket showers and long-drop toilets. See the *Robin Pope Walking Safari*, on page 139, as an example.

Wilderness Safaris (see opposite page) set up the **Kalamu Trail** in 2010. This three-night walking safari takes up to six guests and spends the first night at Kalamu Lagoon Camp. The second night is spent in a mobile fly-camp along the Luangwa River in simple, twin-bedded dome tents with ensuite showers and a separate shared toilet. Whilst for the third you sleep on comfortable mattresses under mosquito nets, set up on 3m high platforms. Each

has a private bathroom below, complete with flush toilet.

The Perekani Trail and the *Aardvark Safari* (pages 138–139) are also excellent suggestions for walking safaris. We can arrange for a different walking safari between many of the bushcamps in the Luangwa Valley; ask us for details.

Practical Details

If you imagine walking safaris to be marches of strength, speed and endurance, then think again. Your luggage will be transported for you; you need only carry your camera and binoculars. A morning’s walk could be anything from 3km to 10km: it’s more like a nature ramble than a strenuous hike. The guide might lead you to follow fresh tracks, or to sit under a tree to watch elephants bathing – deciding with you at the time what looks most promising. As groups are small (usually six guests at most), these walks are flexible and seldom have fixed plans.

It is a good sign if walking in the bush daunts you; a healthy respect for wildlife is vital. Animals can be unpredictable and, occasionally, dangerous. However, the expert guiding on all of our walking safaris should reassure you, as well as minimise the risks. The Luangwa has stringent tests for walking safari guides, and park rules dictate that an armed game scout must accompany every group.

Finally, most walking trips are accompanied by a ‘tea-bearer’, who acts as another experienced pair of eyes, whilst carrying vital supplies of tea, coffee, cold drinks, fruit and delicious cake.

KAWAZA VILLAGE

Beside South Luangwa lies a working, rural Zambian village that has decided to invite visitors to stay. There is nothing contrived or artificial about **Kawaza Village**, but it does offer you the rare opportunity to appreciate Kunda culture, an experience perhaps best described by one of our first guests there: “Kawaza is a typical Kunda village – nothing more and nothing less. After being welcomed and introduced to Jackson, the village headman, I wandered through the village, escorted by Maya (a local guide with excellent English) and Constantino – a local lad with an eccentric taste in earrings!

“In the golden light of the early evening we sat with some of the women as they prepared the evening meal of *nshima* (ground maize) and sauce. Children of all



ages appeared – I’ve never seen such big smiles. The men were busy drinking and chatting. As I joined them, they were delighted that I liked their beer, and surprised I wasn’t married – hence began an interesting conversation about the merits of three wives versus one! Later we visited the traditional healer – an eye-opening experience, as her comments proved astonishingly accurate.

“That evening the village put on a dance, which became an excuse for neighbouring villagers to join the party. I have no idea how many people danced in the moonlight. Later, after a warm-water shower/bath under the stars, I spent a comfortable night under a mosquito net, on a firm bed in a traditional hut.

“The following morning, I helped out with an English lesson at the school before being picked up. I was never asked for money or tips; the cost of the visit had been agreed in advance and put towards vital development initiatives. My visit has been the experience of a lifetime for me, and an equitable exchange of trust, wisdom, culture and money with Kawaza Village.”

Talk to us about Kawaza. We donate all of our booking commission on your time at Kawaza to their school fund.

Making new friends at Kawaza Village

Community school

One excellent small project that has been running for years in Livingstone is the Tujatane School, funded entirely through donations organised by Tongabezi (page 133). Many of Zambia’s best lodges get involved with their local schools. Initially created for the staff’s children, it’s now a focal point for the whole community, confirming the importance of the lodge itself not only to its staff, but also to the wider society. Ask to visit it whilst you’re there; you can meet some of the children and staff. Having visited, many guests have become involved in supporting the school on their return home.