

NORTHERN ZAMBIA

North of the Luangwa Valley is a little-visited area of the country with some very remote, magical spots. Game generally isn't prolific here, but visitors are even rarer, so come for an experience of rural Zambia and some spectacular individual sights.

KASANKA NATIONAL PARK

Kasanka National Park is a gem of a park. It encompasses a wide variety of vegetation zones, from dry evergreen forests to permanent papyrus swamps and moist forests which are close in ecology to the rainforests of central Africa.

Kasanka doesn't have huge herds of big game, but it is home to some unusual species. As well as elephant, buffalo and thousands of puku, you'll find Lichtenstein's hartebeest, sable and the timid roan antelope. Kasanka's predators are shy, but hyena, side-striped jackal and leopard do occur, along with a host of mongooses, and probably the rare, slender-snouted crocodile.

One of the park's highlights is the 'Fibwe tree-hide' – a short climb into a magnificent mahogany. It is probably the best place in Africa for observing wild sitatunga, and sightings of these elusive antelope are virtually guaranteed.

Kasanka is also a superb place for undisturbed birdwatching. Expect to see ibises, herons, kingfishers and bee-eaters, as well as wattled cranes, saddle-billed storks and many others. The area's tropical 'specials' include the green sunbird, Boehm's flycatcher, Ross's turaco, Pel's fishing owl, Anchieta's sunbird and the shy African finfoot.

Visit Kasanka in November and December and you will witness an enormous gathering of around ten million straw-coloured fruit bats. Featured on David Attenborough's 2010 BBC 'Life' series, this is one of the highest concentrations of mammals anywhere on the planet and watching them fly at sunset is awesome.

Kasanka has two small lodges, both delightful places to stay, but both simple by the standards of modern safari camps.

Wasa Lodge is the main base for the park's team and has eight thatched rondavels, each with en-suite showers and a flush toilet, as well as a few more basic chalets. Like the separate bar/dining area, these have a lovely location overlooking Lake Wasa.

Deeper into the park, **Luwombwa Lodge** has three larger, en-suite chalets beside the permanent Luwombwa River, which is ideal for gentle guided canoe trips.

THE BANGWEULU WETLANDS

The Bangweulu Wetlands is an enormous flooded wilderness of low islands, reed beds and shallow lagoons. Surrounding this is a wide band of short-grass floodplains, and beyond are forests. The wetlands are home to much wildlife as well as a scattering of local fishing communities. Bangweulu is a unique destination; it is

fascinating for serious wildlife enthusiasts and Africa-philes, but travel here is not always easy, so it's not ideal for a first safari.

Bangweulu's main attraction is its prolific birdlife, including numerous ducks and geese, as well as flamingos, pelicans, spoonbills, storks, herons, kingfishers, ibises, wattled cranes and the amazing shoebill – a huge, prehistoric-looking bird with a strong likeness to the dodo. Though many come for the birds, Bangweulu's animals can also be spectacular. Tens of thousands of black lechwe – an attractive dark sub-species, endemic to the area – mass on the open grass plains, where you'll also find sitatunga, tsessebe, reedbuck, common duiker and plenty of oribi. Elephant, buffalo and jackal are also frequently seen, but hyena and leopard are less common.

There's really only one place to stay on a fly-in safari: **Shoebill Island Camp**. On an island in the wetlands, Shoebill has five mosquito-proofed, walk-in tents and three huts. Each has an en-suite bucket shower and a flush toilet. At one end of camp is a dining room; at the other is a reed breakfast room with a view over a nearby lagoon. It's a simple bushcamp with no luxuries, but it is the perfect base for exploring by boat, or dugout canoe, or on foot.

From June to December (in the dry season), drives on the surrounding plains are possible, but getting close to shoebills often requires quite demanding walks over (and through!) the floating reed-beds. A visit to Bangweulu is best combined with Kasanka National Park, and possibly Shiwa Ng'andu (see opposite page).

THE LIVINGSTONE MEMORIAL

In 1873, David Livingstone's African explorations finally ended in the village of Chitambo. A simple stone monument marks the spot where his heart was buried, and an inscribed plaque marks the actual location of the village hut in which he died.

If you're lucky, the present Chief Chitambo, great-grandson of the chief who welcomed Livingstone, will guide you from his village to the memorial, which is moving in its austerity. It's easy to come here on a day trip while based at Kasanka, and it is sometimes possible to drop in as part of a 4WD transfer from Kasanka to Bangweulu.



Simple accommodation at Wasa



Fishing is the main source of food and income in the Bangweulu

KUNDALILA FALLS

Kundalila means ‘cooing dove,’ and this is one of Zambia’s most beautiful waterfalls. It’s set in forests where the clear Kaombe River drops off the Muchinga Escarpment. There are spectacular views of the water cascading into the valley below, and you’ll almost never see anyone else here.

NSALU CAVE

North of Kundalila, Nsalu Cave is a huge, gaping arch halfway up a 100m-high granite outcrop, in the middle of nowhere. The rudimentary paintings, made by late Stone-Age and Iron-Age settlers, form a giant curved mural, perhaps 20m wide. Geometric lines and swirls, ladder shapes and sun images overlap in red, white and buttermilk yellow.

LAKE WAKA WAKA

If you’re being driven between Kasanka and Shoebill, then stop for a break beside the shores of Lake Waka Waka. There are long-drop toilets here and a small, basic restcamp. The lake itself is clear and it’s alleged that there are no crocodiles or hippo here, although we cannot vouch for this personally! That said we have heard rumours that this area is being privately developed so access may not be possible.

SHIWA NG’ANDU MANOR HOUSE

We’ve been organising trips to **Shiwa Ng’andu** for many years. It’s a magical English manor house overlooking a picturesque lake, complete with red-brick gatehouse, workers’ cottages with clay-

tilled roofs, a long approach avenue, formal gardens and tremendous style. Inside, stone-slab staircases lead up to panelled corridors hung with old oil paintings and tapestries. It’s dotted with historic memorabilia relating to its founder, Sir Stewart Gore-Browne, from sturdy chests to muskets. Shiwa is a stately home in deepest, darkest Africa.

After decades of crumbling slowly, the manor was taken over in 2001 by Sir Stewart’s eldest grandson, Charlie, and his wife, Jo. They’ve achieved a remarkable restoration, and in doing so energised the whole estate. You may come here intrigued by the history, but you’ll leave enthused for its future, having shared some of Jo and Charlie’s vision for the place. We’ve yet to send anyone to stay at Shiwa who hasn’t been fascinated, so come for at least three days and be prepared to be surprised.

Your time here will usually be packed with activities. There are 4WD game drives, boat trips on the lake, superb birdwatching, fishing, magical walks and the chance to delve into the archives (Jo is an archaeologist). For experienced riders, there’s also a stable of well-trained horses.

Shiwa takes eight guests and is rightly proud of its sustainability: producing almost all of the food that it serves. It’s easily visited as a side-trip from the Luangwa Valley (see the *Shiwa Add-on*, on page 140), or can fit into a more extensive trip to explore northern Zambia. It’s very special; don’t miss it!

In 2009 a new, four-bedroom house opened on the estate called **Impandala House**. Originally built by Stewart Gore-Browne in 1933, Impandala has been completely refurbished and is great value accommodation ideally suited to those who are happy to self-cater.



The great manor house at Shiwa Ng’andu



One of the few places left in the world where you can see the rare shoebill

MUTINONDO WILDERNESS

Reached by a short flight from the Luangwa, the little-known Mutinondo Wilderness is a private reserve covering 100km². Near the edge of the Luangwa Escarpment, the area protects verdant woodlands and wetland areas dotted with granite whalebacks (large smooth hills), crystal-clear rivers and stunning waterfalls.

Mutinondo’s flora is fascinating, including orchids, a species of cycad and, during the ‘Emerald season’, some of the world’s largest mushrooms. Guided horse rides and canoe trips on the river are possible. It’s a haven for ‘old Africa hands’ who are keen walkers, although we recommend walking with one of Mutinondo’s resident guides – as occasional lion and leopard are attracted by the antelope found here.

Mutinondo Wilderness Lodge stands on a large, round granite hill. Built by local craftsmen, its four rustic chalets are constructed almost entirely from local materials. They’re large with private showers and toilets, and two have no doors making them open to the surrounding area. Expect rough-hewn stone in this wild and lovely patch of Africa.