

CANOEING ON THE ZAMBEZI

By Janice and George Mucalov
Special to the Sun



Lower Zambezi National Park is home to 2,000 elephants.

Janice Mucalov/Special to the Sun

“Welcome to canoeing on the Zambezi River, our most dangerous activity at Chiawa,” says Paul, the safari camp’s senior guide. “But there’s only been one serious incident with a crocodile in these parts. A croc pulled a girl out from the front of a dugout canoe on the other side of the river five years ago.”

Hmmm. We pass on the chance to back out, put our faith – and lives – in the supposedly-stable Canadian canoes, and hop in.

Each canoe in our mini-flotilla has a guide who paddles behind a non-paddling guest, and we’re warned to keep our hands inside – “Crocs are opportunistic creatures.”

Every so often, Paul in the lead canoe shouts back, “Large croc around the bend, keep to the left side” or “Hippos ahead!” (He’s already warned us that hippos, which kill more people in Africa than any other animal apart from malarial mosquitoes, could easily capsize our canoe.)



Canoeing on the Zambezi River is offered at Chiawa and Old Mondoro Camps.

Janice Mucalov/Special to the Sun

But our adventure goes off without a hitch.

And when not looking out for the little piggy eyes of hippos poking up from the water or man-eating crocodiles slithering into the muddy shallows, we see impala, waterbuck and troops of baboons on the lush riverbanks, along with an explosion of birdlife – from kingfishers and beautiful rainbow-coloured bee eaters to majestic white-headed fish eagles and giant heron.

It’s actually a surprisingly peaceful scene, and canoeing on the Zambezi River is a highlight of our Zambia safari.

Other African countries like South Africa and Botswana are better known safari destinations. But if you want a really authentic bush experience, you can’t beat Zambia and its Lower Zambezi National Park.

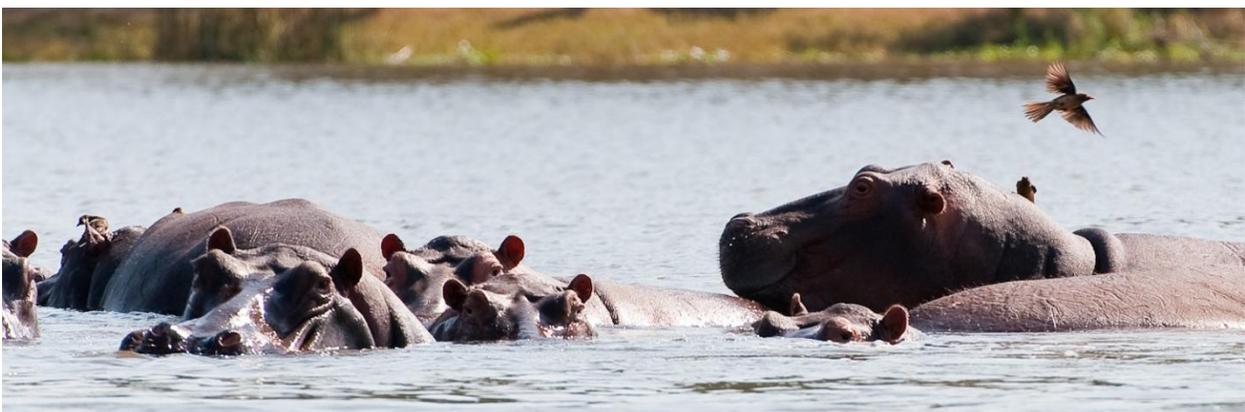


A large Nile crocodile rests near the Zambezi River.

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Set in a grass and woodland valley, the pristine 4,092 sq. km. park stretches between a mountainous escarpment and the mighty Zambezi River. (Zimbabwe is on the opposite side of the wide river.)

Huge herds of elephants wander down every day to drink at the river's edge (the park boasts a healthy population of 2,000). The park is also rich in other wildlife such as Cape buffalo, antelope, lions, leopards and baboons. Rhinos, unfortunately, were poached out some time ago.



Hippos cool off in the Zambezi River.

Chiawa Camp

There are only six small camps within the entire park's unfenced boundaries. They don't boast air-conditioning, hair dryers or spas like some other safari lodges in Africa. But you will enjoy unparalleled and up-close wildlife viewing while canoeing, bush walking, fishing, on game drives and boat cruises, or simply relaxing on the deck of your tent, where the animals come to you. Insiders say it's like going on safari in Kenya 30 years ago.

A one-hour bush flight followed by a 20-minute speedboat ride deposits us at Chiawa Camp. The first camp established in the park, Chiawa has nine deluxe tents on raised timber platforms, strung along the edge of the Zambezi. Claw-footed tubs, king-size beds and even WiFi ensure a high level of comfort.

After gin-and-tonics one sunset, we set out on a game drive in an open-top Land Cruiser. A spotter shines a red-filtered light into the bush to catch animal eyes glittering in the dark.

Different creatures emerge on night drives than during the day. Like lions, which normally hunt at night. We follow the roar of a lion and come across a large male sitting in a clearing. For several spine-tingling minutes, we watch him up close, less than four metres away, before he ambles off into the underbrush.



A safari game ride into Lower Zambezi National Park offers up-close wildlife viewing. The animals even come to you while you relax on the deck of your tent.

Chiawa Camp

One morning, we meet Paul for a bush walk. He's accompanied by a wildlife ranger wielding a rifle. "Welcome to our second most dangerous activity," greets Paul. Uh oh.

We learn that we're more vulnerable walking than when out on game drives, protected by a vehicle. As two-legged creatures walking upright, we're viewed as aggressors by wild animals – and could be attacked.

That adds an edge to our experience. Our senses are more attuned, our ears hyper-alert to the sound of a breaking branch, our eyes scanning beyond the trees for signs of anything larger than an impala.



A bush walk reveals lions at Chiawa Camp.

Chiawa Camp

Again, though, we survive without incident to write this tale.

Paul tells us about the harvester termites that build the red dirt towers dotting the landscape. And he points out the tiny tok-tokkie beetles, which tap the ground with their abdomens to attract a mate.

But while Chiawa introduces us to the wilderness, its satellite camp Old Mondoro – a one-hour speedboat ride downriver – immerses us totally in it.

“Old Mondoro is one of the last few true bush camps in Africa,” Mimi, another guest and avid safari-goer, tells us over dinner the first night.

It has just four tented structures, each with outdoor showers and bathtubs open to the sky (hello geckos!).

From our porch, we can almost reach out and touch the long-tusked elephants munching on the acacia trees outside. Vervet monkeys jump on the roof. And we drift off to sleep listening to the deep “ho, ho, ho” of grunting hippos as they plod up from the river to feed on land at night.



The view from the honeymoon tent at Chiawa Camp.

Chiawa Camp

Here, on a bush walk, our ranger calmly stops us before we step past two African rock pythons, their black-and-brown scales blending in with the volcanic rocks on which they are sunning.

And we have to be driven from the open-sided dining room to our tent at night because the buffalo and elephants wandering about make walking back too dangerous.

We also go canoeing again.



Tourists take a canoe to check out some of the wildlife along the Zambezi River, including an elephant.

Chiawa Camp

Afterwards, while nibbling fresh-baked cupcakes for afternoon tea, we ask Jason, the New Zealand camp manager, if he's encountered problems on the river.

He relates that when guiding a canoe trip the previous week, his guest in front suddenly yelled out "Crocodile!" just as a croc flew off the high riverbank above, striking Jason's shoulder on its way into the water.

Flying crocodiles? Not normally found on safari. Unless perhaps you're canoeing the Zambezi River.

IF YOU GO:

Where to stay: Chiawa Camp and Old Mondoro Camp (www.chiawa.com)

Best time to visit: the cooler, dry season from May to October