

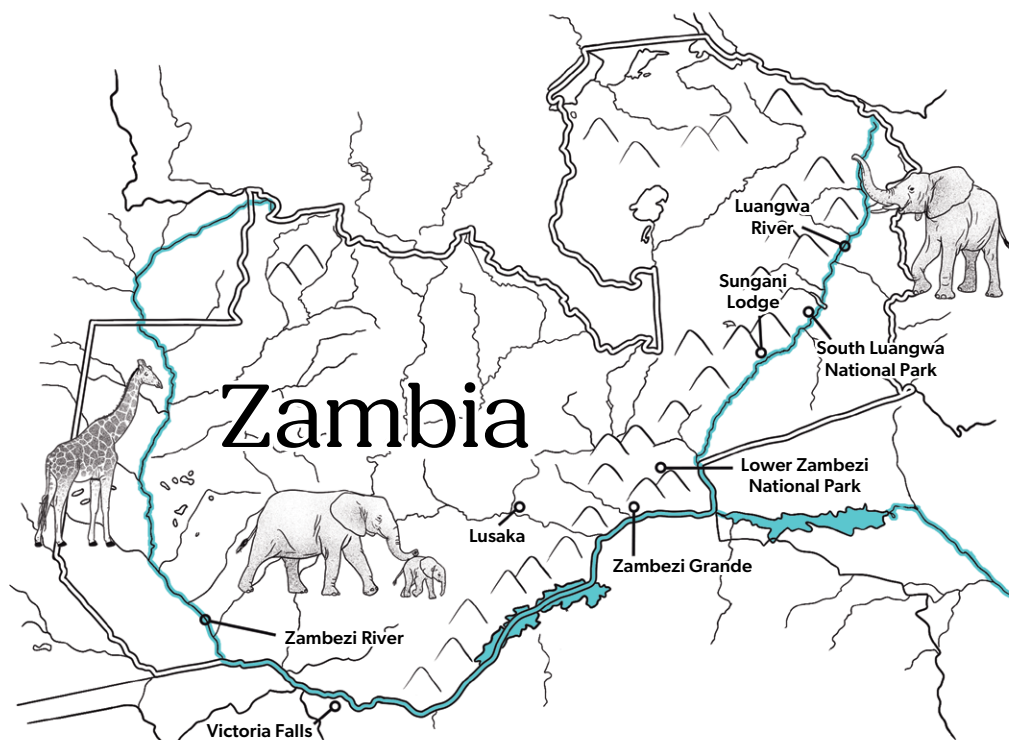
Zambia Up Close



By J.R. Patterson — Photos by Sam Vox

In the African savanna to see
its iconic wildlife for himself, our writer
finds that the animals, conservation and
tourism are closely intertwined.





It's a question of the senses, of smell and hearing, but chiefly of sight: the ability to see a leopard's dangling tail where others see a branch; to tell a crocodile from a rotten log; to spot the tiny red pinpricks of a bush baby's wide eyes at night. There are no tricks to seeing — only a matter of attuning yourself to the right frequency and adjusting your eyes to the bush.

That's what my guide, Moses Mafinya, calls out to me — “Turn on your bush eyes!” — while he's preparing the boat to take us down the Zambezi River.

The Zambezi is Africa's fourth-longest river and for much of its 1,600-mile length it is quiet and indolent. Few major cities lie along its banks, the tsetse fly and sleeping sickness having kept the historical population low. Arriving in the mid-1800s, Scottish missionary and explorer David Livingstone saw it as a path of commerce and Christianity, but his journey, choked with rapids, was slow and deadly. The construction of dams in the 20th century calmed the current, and that, alongside seasonal droughts, means the dishpan of the Zambezi flood plain is experiencing a historic dryness. The decline in available water since 2011 has drawn throngs of animals from across the Zambezi basin to the riverside. Over the same decade, conservation, anti-poaching and tourism activities have had a stabilizing effect on animal populations and created

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The Zambezi River flows some 1,600 miles from its source in Angola to the Indian Ocean on the Mozambique coast, spilling over the spectacular Victoria Falls along the way.

OPPOSITE PAGE,

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
Elephants on the march in Lower Zambezi National Park; Moses Mafinya guides us down the Zambezi River; a female leopard, spotted atop a termite mound.

OPENING SPREAD

Sandy Sakala, guide at Sungani Lodge, scouts the savanna from the hood of a Land Rover.

economic opportunities in the Lower Zambezi region. The interconnection is evident to anyone who visits a Zambian wildlife preserve, where new luxury lodges maintain conservation projects as well as sustainable jobs for local people.

As we zip over the still water under a slowly caramelizing sky, Moses hands me a Mosi beer. “From when I was a little boy, I wanted to be here,” he says, “to be a part of everything working together.” His eyes have always been bush eyes. “You see what you see,” he says kindly, but Moses sees more than most. He is 33, with strong arms and a gap-toothed smile, and is a member of the local Goba tribe. As a guide in the 1,580-square-mile Lower Zambezi National Park, it is the subtler things that matter to him: the chameleons melded with the sandy road; the piles of seeds of dwaba berry, a knucky red fruit that tastes like sweet acetone, which shows baboons have passed through; the battered baobab trees — abused by elephants who love to squeeze the fibrous trunks for water.

Moses also looks for signs of poachers: The park has been the source of countless ivory tusks and many a horn or pangolin scale taken to be ground into pill powder, elephant legs made off with for wastepaper baskets — all useless, except to their natural possessors. The animals are there through concerted effort.





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Breakfast in the bush, in Lower Zambezi National Park.

OPPOSITE PAGE,
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

Observed by an antelope in South Luangwa National Park; a table is set for supper by the lagoon, at Sungani Lodge; big, bigger, biggest — elephants of Lower Zambezi National Park.

Poaching was rampant when conservationist Ian Stevenson first came to the region from Australia in the early 1980s. “I saw these massive herds of elephants — three, four hundred at a time. It was incredible to see, but it wasn’t a good thing. They were banding together for protection.” Soon thereafter, he became involved with Conservation Lower Zambezi (CLZ). Through grants and donations, CLZ has expanded to include a legal assistant, aerial and river patrols, a K9 unit for detecting contraband, and anti-poaching scouts, including Kufadza, an all-female unit.

The area, however, continues to be beleaguered by illegal miners and poachers: In 2022, 240 suspected poachers were apprehended. In 2021, 12 of the area’s roughly 1,000 elephants were poached.

On one morning drive, we see some of those elephants — and countless impala, bushbuck and snake-eagles, and warthogs running single file in descending order like nesting dolls. As we round a corner, the air becomes rank and heavy. The carcass of an elephant, the bones calicoed with meat and entrails, lies in the open. But it is not a sad scene, only everything as it should be. “It’s a natural kill,” Moses says. “The lions will eat well.” The remains will also feed many hyenas, vultures, crocodiles and wild dogs.

We spend our days on the river, or in the bush, returning to camp at Zambezi Grande at the onset of evening to blow the dust away with fine hospitality and cold refreshments after a full day of tropical sun. The Grande is set on the river a few miles outside the western entrance to the park, and I have a luxurious cabin on a high, red bank over the river.

Zambezi Grande

The family-owned game lodge features 10 rooms and five stand-alone suites on the river’s edge.

Guests enjoy meals of roasted impala and Pekin duck from local farms, and gin that flows straight from the Iconic African Distillery near Chisamba.

On my final evening at camp, we take a drive in the deep black of night, a spotter casting a beam of light into the forest, looking for eyeshine. There is plenty: civet cats, genets, a herd of buffalo and a young bull elephant that, in a show of bravado, rears up on his hind legs, extends his trunk and gives a loud trumpet.

Returning to my cabin, I sit for a long while on the veranda, alone with my thoughts after another peerless day. The fireflies blink around me, and Ursa Major, upside down below the equator, empties its ladle over the dark Zambezi escarpment.

The next morning, I fly 200 miles northeast to South Luangwa National Park, a 3,500-square-mile blotch of wood and marshland. Sungani Lodge is the newest lodge in the park, comprising a short string of sturdy canvas tents lining an oxbow lagoon off the Luangwa River — a tributary of the Zambezi. Under the purview of the Davy family and their staff, Sungani Lodge has the self-sufficient atmosphere of a family farm.

The Davys found the Sungani site, a derelict camp far from resources, in 2018. They were told it was too remote, too dangerous — even the government had largely given over the area to poaching. Black rhino was hunted out in the 1980s, and elephants were on the wane. The Davys persisted — they bettered the roads, which lured anti-poaching units back, and began providing resources and funding for organizations like Conservation South Luangwa and the Zambia Carnivore Project. They have since cleared an airstrip for their Cessna 206. Its flights to and from nearby Mfuwe International Airport, to collect goods and guests, are another poaching inhibitor.









ABOVE

The elevated main buildings at Sungani Lodge, surrounded by indigenous trees.

OPPOSITE PAGE,
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

A hippopotamus forages near Sungani Lodge; one of South Luangwa National Park's taller residents; the swimming pool at Zambezi Grande is certified hippo-free.

PREVIOUS SPREAD

Take me to the river: the majestic Zambezi, with its namesake escarpment in the background.

Sungani Lodge

Sungani Lodge, along with its nearby sister encampment, Kulandila Camp, offers guests extreme comfort in the unspoiled savanna. Outings and activities include walking safaris, bush meals, photographic hideouts and game drives.

During those first days, the Davy family barely got a glimpse of wildlife. “Everything would bolt at the sight of a vehicle,” Lynne Davy tells me. “Now, the impala hardly bother to move out of the way.” Today, there are pukus, buffalo, giraffe, impala and elephants on the edge of the lagoon that abuts the lodge, and grunting hippos chewing through the duckweed. And they aren’t shy. Animals regularly enter the camp on their way to and from the water, passing under the elevated catwalks connecting the tents.

It wasn’t easy to reduce poaching in the area, says Lynne. “The villages here are very poor, and the animals were worth much more as trophies and food, and locals would poach them,” she says.

I talk to John Chisi, a Kunda man in his fifties with large, calloused hands. Before working as a waiter at Sungani Lodge, John was a subsistence farmer with a small plot of maize. His childhood had revolved around a mud hut, and there was never any money. “Life was very down,” he says. “We hunted for food: hippo, kudu, eland. We did not see the value of the animals. Only when the opportunities came — the better work, the wages, education — did that change.”

“Tourism is one of the biggest forces of good here,” Cherri Briggs, who lives along the Zambezi, tells me one night over supper. Her foundation, Direct Impact Africa, funds various entrepreneurial projects in the Zambezi’s Chiawa area: farms, clinics, schools and sports programs. “Tourism brings jobs, but also the idea that this place matters and that change is possible.”

Along with conservation groups, lodges often form the largest opposition to the mining operations, both by

multinational corporations and unregulated prospectors, that tear into the land and pollute the water. The lodges help bring international attention and funds in quantities that local groups struggle to raise. Zambezi Grande employs 35 people, Sungani Lodge 45, but the economic echo reverberates into the hundreds.

Sound, too, reverberates, carrying the nightly commotion of the bush over the lagoon into my tent. As I lie in bed one night, the hippos bluster and snort nearby while a few growling lions seem just beyond the door.

When I describe that feeling of closeness to Sungani Lodge guide, Sandy Sakala, the next morning, he has already seen the lions’ pawprints on the sandy road outside my tent. We drive out to try to spot them, following their spoor in ever-widening figure eights. “If they’re moving this way, they’re hunting,” Sandy says. We never find them but see plenty of elephants and Masai giraffes — first a mother and calf, then a “journey” of four, which was slow but elegant, like a group of tired dancers, with pursed lips and teary eyes.

The animals I didn’t encounter — leopard, pangolin, aardvark, zebra — were there too, as were those doing their best to ensure they remained. My days were rich with sights, but I remember best a pied kingfisher, a furry mongoose slinking into a thicket, and a flock of carmine bee-eaters whirling overhead in a kaleidoscope of coral and blue, their passing like a great exhalation. And I remember the shudder of a lion’s muscle shaking off the flies; the ripples on the water after a hippo dipped soundlessly into the river; the fine dust that rose and hung in the red air shot through with the gold of sunset. You see what you see. ♦

