

ZAMBIA'S safari zeal

BY SUE WATT

Beautiful, friendly and virtually tourist-free, Zambia is one of Africa's rising safari destinations. It's also one of the continent's leading forces in community-based tourism, as a number of trendsetting operators are showing.

With my nails digging into his shoulders and my inner thighs gripping his hips, John Coppinger senses my nervousness and asks calmly if I'm ready to go. Sitting with his back to me in the pilot seat of his microlight, John is so close to me in this tiny plane, it feels as though he's giving me a piggyback. As the engine revs up, our speed increases on the grassy runway. Suddenly, the strip disappears and we're flying, rising higher and higher as Tafika Camp gets smaller and smaller beneath us. "Oh, my God," I whisper, not out of fear, now, but awe, as the vastness and beauty of Zambia's South Luangwa National Park opens up before me.

I see for the first time the extent of Luangwa River's wayward path across the plains; how it has swollen and shrunk with the seasons. In its wake are dried-up riverbeds, oxbow pools and fertile lagoons. From up in the sky, as the dry season ends, they look like small patches of green on an expansive swathe of gold.

Every morning, John offers Tafika's guests a bird's-eye view of Zambia's wildlife on 15- to 20-minute flights above the 9,050-square-kilometre park that is home to 60 species of mammals and more than 400 different types of birds. Today, we're looking for lions.

Someone heard them calling during the night and thought there'd been a kill. We fly over elephants, buffalos and giraffes at a height that's low enough to let us appreciate their immense sizes but high enough not to distress them.

A hippo breaks into an ungainly trot, heading to water after grazing all night; crocodiles slide off their sandy nests, splashing into the river. "I don't mind scaring the crocs," John says, then apologises to a previously unseen impala that bolts from under a sausage tree. The lions evade us, but the early-morning scene of bush life more than makes up for their absence.

Life in this part of the world isn't just about animals, however, as John and his wife Carol

are keenly aware. Co-owners with Bryan Jackson, of Remote Africa Safaris (RAS) and the beautiful Tafika Camp, they've lived near the remote Nsefu sector of South Luangwa National Park for 16 years. To them, and to the hundreds of people who live in nearby Mkasanga village, the bush is home.

John began guiding in 1984 under the auspices of Norman Carr, a revered game ranger and legend in the safari world. Norman believed that indigenous people should benefit from the income of visitors and became one of the pioneers of responsible tourism in Africa. In 1950, he approached the local chief, Nsefu, asking that part of his tribal land be used as a game reserve, getting the community to help with and, crucially, receiving income from wildlife conservation. Eleven years later, Carr developed the concept of photographic walking safaris for which South Luangwa is now famous.

Today, John and Carol are continuing Norman's legacy in style. At Tafika, they have just six comfortable reed chalets overlooking the river. Offering excellent guiding and a true

wilderness experience on walking safaris around Tafika and between their Chikoko Tree and Crocodile River Camps, they also work closely with Mkasanga Village, supporting health care and education, allowing guests the chance to see the human side of life in the bush.

Most of Tafika's employees live in Mkasanga and, as we drive along the dusty orange road, children rush out to greet us and women in brightly coloured fabrics wave and smile. The school, a single-storey building with a handful of classrooms, is in the centre of the village and Francis, the headmaster, shakes our hands warmly as around 200 children sit on the ground before us to sing a welcome song. Their singing would melt the coldest of hearts. "Now you've come here; you are our friends," Francis says, detailing the school's daily rituals, which start at 6.30 a.m. when pupils clean their own classrooms.

Individual children then recite poems about education, equal rights, HIV/AIDS and the evils of poaching, as Francis

explains, "Education is the best opportunity in life. We're a very blessed school because we're supported by Tafika and people who come to see the animals. Poaching takes the animals away from us, and they must be cared for."

Walking through the village of small, circular reed houses, we meet women pounding maize to make flour using an enormous wooden club that's taller than me. It's hard work being a woman in rural Zambia. Many get pregnant or marry at as young as 14 years of age, and they're expected to do all the chores even if they're at school. But gradually, things are improving.

Through the Tafika Fund, financed by a percentage of RAS room rates and donations, children achieving the best marks at Mkasanga school are awarded high-school scholarships. "Before we started funding education, it wasn't something children aspired to. Now, it's very important; they want to go to school," Carol explains. "We try to support girls wherever possible. If they don't get top marks, we may sponsor them anyway – they're few and far between. It's heartbreaking refusing funding, particularly for girls, so I follow my instincts."

The fund also pays for skills training, textbooks, stationery, teachers' salaries and accommodation, the local health clinic and a medical officer's salary; local sewing industries for women are supported by Tafika, too, and the difference it makes to life in Mkasanga is tangible.

Before we leave, we visit the church, a simple brick building with few religious adornments, and listen to its teenage choir. One girl has a baby strapped to her back in a colourful papoose, bouncing up and down as she claps and dances. Warm and uplifting, the songs – and Mkasanga – stay in my mind for days.

Another protégé of Norman's is Robin Pope who, with his wife Jo, established Robin Pope Safaris (RPS), renowned for its walking expeditions, excellent guiding and luxury camps, including Nkwali, Tena Tena and Zambia's oldest, Nsefu.

Named after the tribal chief who first gave his land to conservation, Nsefu is an elegant, relaxing camp on a riverbank. Everything here seems chilled: on a game drive, a giraffe comes close to our Land Cruiser, almost poking her head inside to satisfy her curiosity; a lion cub fights tiredness like a young child, shaking itself awake before flopping back onto its mum. During the day, elephants wander across the river and Nsefu's grounds at will; leopards loiter at night.

RPS has also been continuing Norman's tradition of community development – recently, it became the joint overall winner of the Responsible Tourism Awards in London's World Travel Market for the work it does with Kawaza Village, home to many of RPS' staff. Since the late 1980s, the village school has benefitted from donations from guests and RPS, and in 1997, it established the Kawaza Village Tourism Project, run by and for the local people.

Wandering around the village of mud and thatch houses, we see a woman making the local gin, enigmatically called moonshine, using a rudimentary condenser involving half a tyre, a pipe and a clay pot. I take a sip and almost burn my throat. It's fiery stuff.

Nearby, women and children pump water from the bore hole with lively disputes about whose turn it is next. Children as young as five balance 10-litre buckets full to the brim on their heads with consummate ease.



FLYING HIGH

Clockwise from this image: Enjoying a microflight over Zambia's Luangwa National Park; a comfortable bedroom at Tafika; children in Mkasanga school; Kawaza guest rondavels; a reed chalet at Tafika.

Opening spread: Giraffes are among the wildlife you'll likely spot on safari in Zambia.

Next spread: Elephants cooling down.



We visit the busy health clinic where Abraham, the medical officer, tells us the main issue here is malaria. They've just been given nets to distribute to the local children but supplies of drugs and equipment such as sutures are still low. Although many guests bring donations, those that are sent from abroad often "disappear" on the way.

At Kawaza Basic School, we chat to children who want to be doctors, engineers and teachers, aspirations that elsewhere in rural Zambia might seem unthinkable. Not here, Jo Pope tells me: "I get wonderful emails from all over the country saying, 'If you hadn't supported me through education, I would still be in the village without work, and now I am an accountant, a forestry man, a nurse...'"

As we walk, ladies chat to Constantino, our guide (who seems to know them all), and invite us to lunch in their homes. We decline, only because our meal is being prepared in the *shitenge*, an open-sided reed house that is the bush equivalent of a village hall. We feast on *nshima* (a maize dish similar to sticky rice), chicken relish and deliciously aromatic pumpkin leaves.

Kawaza offers accommodation for guests in simple but spotless reed-and-thatch *rondavels* (round houses) and the evening entertainment revolves around the village fire, with dancing, drumming and storytelling – and naturally, some moonshine to help nourish the soul.

Both Mkasanga and Kawaza are magical experiences but they're not a show put on for tourists – it's simply how life is here. As Jo explains: "The success is keeping things simple and real – a real village with the people who live there, just doing their daily activities."

Norman's legacy is clearly in good hands. •

Photography by Sue Watt.



travel facts

GETTING THERE

Under a codeshare agreement, South African Airways (SAA) and Qantas fly direct from Perth and Sydney to Johannesburg. From here, SAA offers connecting flights to Lusaka in Zambia.

- Qantas. 131-313; qantas.com.au
- South African Airways. 1300-435-972; flysaa.com

Kenya Airways offers daily flights from Sydney to Nairobi, capital of Kenya, with onward connections to Lusaka. 1300-787-310 and 61-2/9767-4310; kenya-airways.com

GETTING AROUND

Expert Africa offers tailor-made trips across Africa. A 10-night/11-day trip in Zambia staying at Remote Africa Safaris' Tafika camp and Robin Pope Safaris' Nkwali and Nsefu camps, South Luangwa National Park costs from AU\$4,402 per person, twin share. This includes internal flights to and from Mfuwe, day and night safari drives in open 4WD vehicles, walking safaris, a visit to Kawaza Village, meals, most drinks, transfers, park fees and an overnight stop in Lusaka. 1800-995-397; expertafrica.com

Several other tour companies offer guided trips around Africa, including:

- Adventure World. 1300-295-049; adventureworld.com.au
- Creative Holidays. creativeholidays.com
- Wildlife Safari. 1800-998-558; wildlifesafari.com.au

WHEN TO GO

Tafika, Nsefu and Kawaza Village are open to guests in the dry season, generally May to November.

WHERE TO STAY

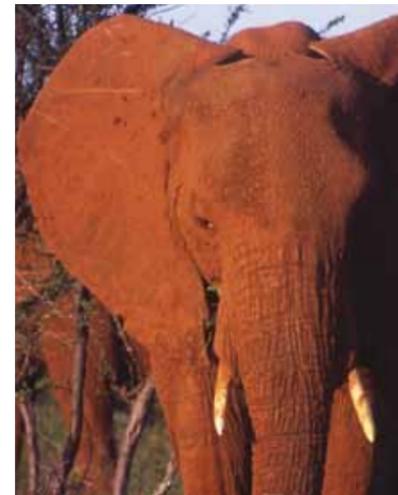
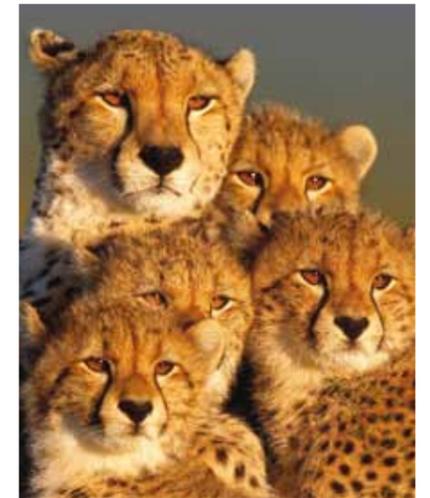
You can find further information on the camps and the community projects below:

- Tafika and the Tafika Fund – Remote Africa Safaris; 260-216/246-185; remoteafrica.com
- Nsefu and Kawaza Village – Robin Pope Safaris; 265/177-0540; robinpopesafaris.net

FURTHER INFORMATION

Talk to Zambia Tourism Board for additional tips on travelling to Zambia. zambiatourism.com

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