



## GET ON YOUR FEET

Recognising the growing desire from travellers to connect with nature and to be more active, more and more lodges are offering guided walking options, ranging from a short few hours to longer expeditions. But what is it really like to participate in a multiple-day walking safari? To find out, we visited the South Luangwa National Park in Zambia, one of the world's great wildlife reserves

WORDS: **SUE WATT**





Communicating only in hand signals, Alex beckons us to come closer. We crouch down and move slowly along the riverbank. Some 30 metres ahead wading through shallow water are four elephants, one so tiny he fits under his mother's tummy. We watch mum nudging him gently with her trunk and in the stillness hear their soft rumbles soothing the little baby. "This is how I like seeing elephants," Alex whispers, "when they're at peace and undisturbed and don't even know we're here."

Moments like this are what walking safaris are all about. For me, it's the best way to explore the bush, better than a game drive with that inescapable engine drone and the inevitable degree of separation from nature that comes from sitting in a vehicle. On foot, you have to rely on all your senses and on the wits and wisdom of your team to lead you safely through the wilderness.

Our team consists of our armed scout Amon in the lead, guide Alex Phiri and tea-bearer Kaluba at the rear. At 6am, we'd left Tafika camp outside South Luangwa National Park for Chikoko Tree Camp, crossing the mirror-like Luangwa River by canoe. The rest of our journey is to be on foot.

When the elephants move on, we amble through cool riverine woodland as Alex points out tracks on dusty hippo trails. "This one's a relaxed porcupine," he says. "How do you know his mood?" I ask, bemused. "Because these fine lines in the sand are his quills," he responds. "When they're at ease, they drag them behind."

By 8.30am, we're ready for a break. Not that the walking is tough: the terrain is flat, the pace slow and we've stopped frequently for chats, but in dry-season September it's already hot. Kaluba lights a fire by rubbing sticks together and makes some tea.

Meanwhile, Amon surveys the area and finds a dozen Cookson's wildebeest resting by the river. Beyond them, 15 rare and beguiling roan are coming calmly to the water, their strange facial markings resembling burglars' balaclavas. They drink quietly, taking turns with impala and kudu. It feels like we're in a silent movie melting into the hushed natural world playing out around us.

As we walk, the heat saps our energy. Still, we must keep focused because those four elephants have reappeared and the matriarch has sensed us. With safety always paramount, we give them a wide berth and are relieved to reach Chikoko by 10am.

Chikoko is beautifully rustic. The sitenje (lounge) centres around a huge tree with colourful cushions scattered around its roots, a sofa, hammocks, dining table and a small bar. Our two-storey room, with walls made of reeds, has a bed and directors' chairs on the top floor, looking across a dry lagoon through a glassless 'window'. There are solar lamps and a mosquito net. The shower, flush loo and sink are on the ground floor. Basic it might be, but it's comfortable and full of character.

Chef Patson creates tasty feasts with just an open fire, an earth oven and a happy smile. We linger over lunch of feta and aubergine salad, cheese mash potatoes, chicken goujons, warm fresh bread and chilled wine. After a nap and a cool shower, we manage a gentle stroll around the lagoon. Impala, puku and waterbuck graze contentedly; zebras run away. Still baking hot, we return to camp for welcome G&Ts and a three-course dinner.

A new camp called Mapazi is our destination the next morning. Walking through mopane woodland, our peace is shattered by an impala's shrill bark, hyena giggles and a leopard disappearing across the gully. "The leopard killed →



For more on walking safari options across Africa, see the feature *Body and Soul* in Travel Africa issue 85

**Early start:** Walking between Crocodile Camp and Chikoko Tree Camp with Remote Africa

TRAVEL AFRICA

# 12

THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT **WALKING SAFARIS**

## 01 CREATURE COMFORTS

Some safaris focus on tracking wildlife on foot, staying at the same camp throughout. 'Mobile safaris' involve hiking from one point to another, fly-camping in different locations most nights. Either way, there'll be ample food, cold drinks, comfortable beds, showers and decent loos!

## 02 TAKE IT EASY

You don't need to be particularly fit. The pace is slow, with frequent stops to learn about the wildlife and habitat. Distances vary depending on what you encounter. Most walks last between two-five hours with breaks.

## 03 FIRST-TIME NERVES

Tracking big game sometimes better suits guests who've been on safari before and are a bit more aware of what to expect. You'll have an experienced guide and an armed scout, but very little prepares you for that first time you see a lion or elephant. On foot, you might feel vulnerable or exposed. You must stay calm, listen, obey your guide, and NEVER run. By running, you act like prey and the predator will chase you.

## 04 AGE CONCERNS

There's usually an age limit for children of around 14 to 16 years. But there's no upper limit for older people.

## 05 SPENING A PENNY

Don't worry about needing the loo: there are plenty in the bush, behind shrubs and out of sight. Your guide will check for unwelcome wildlife and find a safe, private spot.

## 06 FASHION SENSE

Wear neutral colours to blend with the bush, avoiding brights and whites. Blue and black attract tsetse flies and their nasty nip. Keep clothes loose and layer them for chilly mornings.

## 07 HOT STUFF

The Luangwa Valley can get exhaustingly hot in the summer months. Walks start at sunrise to

make the most of the cooler temperatures, then you're usually back at camp for lunch and a rest before a shorter late-afternoon stroll. Take a hat and sunscreen and drink often to avoid dehydration.

## 08 WATCH YOUR STEP

Bush terrain has been moulded over generations by its wild residents, from well-trodden hippo trails to rutted, ankle-twisting mud trampled by elephants. Wear comfortable, closed walking shoes.

## 09 SILENCE IS GOLDEN

Stay quiet: you don't want to scare the wildlife. Crucially, your guide needs to listen for sounds that might just keep you safe: squirrels squealing or impala barking suggest predators could be around.

## 10 QUIET TIMES...

It's not all about adrenaline – sometimes there's little significant to see but nature's simplicity can provide its own thrills. Try to stay focused and just enjoy the walk. Imagine you're the guide looking out for your guests at all times!

## 11...DOWNTIMES

Be prepared for long breaks in camp, perhaps from 11am until 4pm during hotter months. Bring some books, sketch, write a journal, linger over lunch or simply doze...

## 12 ...& SPECIAL TIMES

Tracking big game on foot can be spine-tingling and nerve-wracking all at once. Let your guide show you their world, take time to enjoy it, and immerse yourself in nature at its best.



WILL WHITFORD (3)



the impala but hyenas stole her meal," Alex explains. Then we see four hyena-thieves running away, one with an impala leg dangling from his blood-stained jaws.

At Zebra Plains, we meet up with Deb Tittle. A British guide with over 20 years' experience, Deb opened Mapazi last year in the remote north of South Luangwa. As we walk, a nasty smell hits us. She points to runny poo the consistency and colour of molten tar. "This is really fresh - when a leopard's had blood from a kill it's very loose. She's probably somewhere in these thickets..."

We look around, listening for cries from potential prey but the woodland remains stubbornly silent. With the temperature rising, we leave our elusive cat to reach Mapazi an hour later.

With just three tents and an octagonal canvas sitenje built around a sausage tree, Mapazi is an intimate, unpretentious bush camp near the river. Our Meru-style tent has sturdy wooden furniture and solar lighting. A separate shower-room with wood fittings and a 'proper' loo lies a few paces away.

Over a cold beer and lunch of souvlaki, homemade falafels and hummus, Deb describes her walking style as "very proactive, not your normal nature walk." She proves that over the next two days.

Spotting a lone hyena snoozing in the sun, Deb suggests we "sneak up on him." Strangely, I don't feel nervous - I trust Deb, our scout Ison is keeping a look-out, and lone hyenas apparently don't attack humans. At just four metres away, I'm spine-tingly close to our sleepy predator, happily watching him until he wakes, irritated by flies. He jumps up, twisting around almost in mid-air and stares at us, baffled, before slouching away.

Next day, we track leopards through woodlands of ebonies and cathedral mopane. Deb shows us pin-sharp hairlines on the toepads of a female's paw- →

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TRAVEL AFRICA

**Top right:** Tea break. Kalubu lights a fire by rubbing sticks together to get a brew going on our Chikoko Trail

**Above:** Bush camp facilities are basic but very comfortable and perfectly suited to our needs: a sheltered campsite (Mapazi) and a lounge/dining area in which to gather or just relax (Chikoko Tree Camp)



**On track:**

As well as the opportunity to see big cats on foot, South Luangwa offers a steady flow of sightings of antelope – roan, kudu and impala are pictured here – elephants and other animals, especially along the river



WILL WHITFORD (2)

*We hide behind a tamarind tree but Deb is concerned because the wind, carrying our scent, is swirling around. To make matters worse, the elephants are eating tamarind trees for breakfast and moving in our direction. “Time to go – we’re on their elephant highway.”*

print. “These are very fresh. She must be close: she got up just as she heard us,” she says, pointing to tiny dust particles indicating her direction. We find bigger male tracks and follow them too. It’s not easy. “Cats usually go in fairly straight lines, but these are all over the place,” Deb explains. Then we discover hyena tracks pursuing our leopards.

Strangely, tree squirrels, puku and oxpeckers, the usual bush whistle-blowers, are all quiet but we have that spine-chilling sensation that something, somewhere is watching us.

While we’re prowling around, Ison spots elephants ahead, appearing and disappearing soundlessly through the woods like giant ghosts. We hide behind a tamarind tree but Deb is concerned because the wind, carrying our scent, is swirling around. To make matters worse, the elephants are eating tamarind trees for breakfast and moving in our direction. “Time to go – we’re on their elephant highway,” she whispers as we leave our leopard and hyena unseen.

Just before sunset, we see elephants again as we’re ambling along the riverbank. Unaware of us, they’re splashing, slurping and playing in the water, now tinged gold in the evening sun, with flocks of carmine bee-eaters the colour of rosé wine fluttering all around.

It’s another magical moment, watching wild animals on their territory, on their terms, on foot... K



Sue Watt’s trip was organised by Safari Consultants, and she flew Ethiopian Airlines.