

JUL 29  
2013

# Falling Into Zambia: Mfuwe and The Bushcamp Company's Mfuwe Lodge



by Bekah Wright

"You've caught it." The words startled me awake from a siesta slumber. Hot from the Zambian heat, my mind searched for the meaning of the utterance, first thoughts turning to bodily appendages, wondering if a malaria-carrying insect had bitten me. Later, the reality of the words would take on a whole different essence.

## Arriving in Mfuwe

After almost 48 hours of travel, our small group of journalists (three counting me, plus one publicist) stepped off yet a fourth plane and onto the tarmac of Zambia's Mfuwe International Airport. The tiny building also houses the village's bank and post boxes, along with several papier-mâché creatures signifying the wildlife to be encountered in the bush. Despite lack of sleep, I perked up as we climbed into the vehicle that would carry us into the wild.

The drive through Mfuwe held magic of its own. Post sunset, the sky was darkening with dramatic clouds, the result of brush fires throughout the countryside. The smell of wood fires was everywhere, from front yards where neighbors were gathering, to a bare-chested, elderly man keeping the blaze of a brush fire under control; a mighty struggle between he and the element itself.

A multitude of bicycles whizzed past our Land Rover, most carrying more than one person. Impressive were the passengers on these two-wheeled vehicles, many balancing large vessels of water atop their heads, not a drop spilled in transport. Other travelers along the road ferried firewood over one shoulder or babies slung across their bellies in a sling.

Interspersed between cinderblock storefronts with names like Peace & Love Pharmacy, Taonga Hair Saloon and Gideon's Blessings, Fashions and Music Center, were small huts that looked as though their structure could blow away at the slightest wind, yet had maintained their residence for decades.

Soon, signs of villagers gave away to pure nature, a barely perceivable shift from "town" to "bush." Upon arriving at the gate of South Luangwa National Park, a rifle-bedecked security guard approached our Land Rover, asking about our origins. Blurry-brained, I turned to our driver, searching for an answer. "Where are you from?" Suddenly, my hometown of Los Angeles seemed an unlikely dream from which I'd just awoken.

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## Falling Into Zambia: Bilimungwe's Sleeping Lions



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by Bekah Wright

"Good morning." The whispered wake-up call from outside my chalet brought back childhood memories of my grandmother rousing me on school days. The mosquito netting around my bed spoke of a different time and place, though. Zambia. Mfuwe Lodge to be exact.

Mornings at The Bushcamp Company camps begin at 5:45 a.m.. Guests convene around a wood fire, nodding over cups of chicory-laced Zambian coffee, waiting for the caffeine to kick in. Once it does, continental breakfast lures. No boxed pastries here. Fresh baked bread is toasted over a small grate, hot porridge waits to warm bellies, muffins still hot from the oven tempt in a basket.

As will occur every day, there's the urge to linger over breakfast, when our guide, Manda Chisanga alerts, "Time to go!" As if the caffeine hits at just that moment, senses tune in. Adventure is guaranteed in the day ahead. Are we beginning with a walking tour? Climbing into a Land Rover to tackle rough terrain? "Grab your bags, we're heading to the airport." What?! **Hadn't we just landed** the night before after almost two days of flying? The thought of seat-belt in yet again — not appealing.

The hint of a smile was noted on the face of Andy Hogg, owner of The Bushcamp Company. This did not dissipate grumbles.

Back we drove to Mfuwe International Airport, where we climbed into an airplane with exactly enough seats for our party of five. "I'm taking you to Bilimungwe, your next camp," the pilot notified. "Andy thought you'd like to see South Luangwa National Park from above instead of taking the three-hour drive." The reason behind Andy's smile was revealed. And now, smiles were breaking across our faces as we took in a birds-eye view of the 9,050 square kilometers of the park.

All too soon, the flight ended with a bumpy landing in a field. Upon disembarking, Manda pointed to the plane's tire, now flat. The pilot would be accompanying us to Bilimungwe. There were no mechanics to come to the rescue. This was the bush, after all. The true bush. We were now in the thick of it. Speaking to this was the fact that we passed no villagers or vehicles en route to Bilimungwe. Instead, the field leading to the camp's entrance was filled with impalas, warthogs and baboons. An urge to hop from the vehicle and participate in what was surely nature's recess came over me. Alas, we continued over a crest and under a giant mahogany tree, where Bilimungwe's staff waited to greet us.

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## Falling Into Zambia: The Long Walk to Chindeni



by Bekah Wright

Another morning dawned in Zambia with mumbled hellos over coffee by the fire. All too soon, packed duffels were dutifully waiting by the Land Rover. This day, our guide, Manda Chisanga, surprised us. "Throw your bags in, but don't climb onboard. We're walking to our next camp, Chindeni."

Remembering the airplane that had brought us from Mfuwe Lodge to Bilimungwe Camp, saving us from a grueling three-hour drive, I inwardly gulped. Should I have doubled up my socks? Eaten a little extra breakfast for fuel? There was another change-up, too. "We'll be saying goodbye to our guides." Priest and Angel weren't coming with us? Of course, they were staff at Bilimungwe Camp, but in the short time we'd been there, they'd become like family members. We clung to the time we'd have with them on what turned out would be a two-hour walk to Chindeni.

Photos were taken with our Bill Camp family before setting off into the bush. How had this intimacy been formed in such a short time? Was it due to lack of distractions? After all, The Bushcamp Company camps run on solar power alone, so there are no televisions, computers or cell phones to distract from the surroundings, or human company for that matter. Then there was the ever-growing lack of shyness when it came to situations like dropping trou during safari when "nature calls." Funny how the gentlemen in our group never seemed to have the urgency we ladies did in this department.

The other thing our group was finally embracing – silence. The bush, as it turns out, isn't really all that quiet. Once human chatter dies down, there's a lot to listen to. There was one sound, though, that did plague me — the call of the turtle dove proclaiming, "Work harder!" Really? How about zip it! I'm trying to commune with nature here, and work is the last thing I want to think about. Though I was fascinated to discover shards of sharpening tools from bygone days when a portion of the park had been a village going through the motions of day-to-day activities.

This particular morning, the wild, like our group, also seemed to be in laid-back mode. Grazing in a field was a herd of buffalo. Preening from a branch were stunningly colored birds. Gracefully loping in the distance were a handful of giraffes, which I swear were yawning.

After an hour of trekking, a fallen tree presented itself as the perfect perch for morning tea. Out of a backpack came tins with the mixings of chicory coffee, tea and freshly baked shortbread. This was generally a time we'd break from our silence and ply Manda with questions we'd accumulated along our walk. What is the life expectancy of certain animals? Do any animals mate for fun? What's the difference between dung and scat?

In short order, we were back on course. Our path took us alongside the Luangwa River. A loud whooshing noise broke the


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## Falling Into Zambia: Zungulila, Champagne and Floating on Water



by Bekah Wright

Another morning in Zambia, another round of goodbyes. This was followed by hellos and smiles at a new camp, Zungulila. (A name I still can't pronounce.) Upon arriving, Zungulila's staff filled in our guide, Manda Chisanga, on the shenanigans of a group of hyenas who'd visited the camp the night before. Apparently, they'd eaten the open-air lobby's carpets, including a zebra hide.

"Zebra hide? I" asked quizzically? Said hide had been under a stack of trunks, part of the Zungulila's bygone, Old Africa theme. In fact, I'd already affected an accent like Meryl Streep in *Out of Africa* and was scouting around for Robert Redford. "That's nothing," Manda replied. "Hyenas eat anything, including car batteries. Of all the scat and dung in the bush, the only kind that's never eaten by another creature is that of the hyena. It's deadly."

*Hyenas are very uncivilized*, my inner Meryl thought.

In short order, lunch was served. To our utter shock, two other guests were at the table. This was the first time on safari we'd actually encountered other people, and Texans at that. It was a jolt, reminding us we'd be returning to Mfuwe the next day, and soon after that, "civilization." As it turned out, the Texans were in Zambia to learn about bush conservation practices they could implement on their ranch. The bush certainly was providing an education.

Post siesta, it was time for a walking safari. By now the Texans had departed and it was again just our small throng. We traipsed into our vast classroom, which was giving a lesson in botany this particular afternoon. Feeling particularly plucky, I inhaled African basil to check out its benefits for the lungs. Ahh... mine felt clear as a bell. I passed on trying another weed Manda identified as elephant chewing gum.

Further along the trail, Manda spotted what looked like mini marshmallows in the grass. He picked up a few. Could we guess what they were? Twice-digested desert brush hare poop. Um, okay. Why twice? Apparently, eating their first round of poop is good for the hare. Now here's the kicker. Eating the hare's second round of poop is good for humans. You read me right, it's supposed to be good for eye health. Did I mention I was feeling plucky in the paragraph above? Oh, yeah. I ate rabbit poop. And I liked it. Shared it, too.

Dearest hyenas, I realize I referred to you as uncivilized. My apologies. I'm sure those car batteries also tasted just like toasted wheat.

Soon after this snack, we passed a group of buffalo. The river they

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## Falling Into Zambia: Goodbyes and Welcomes



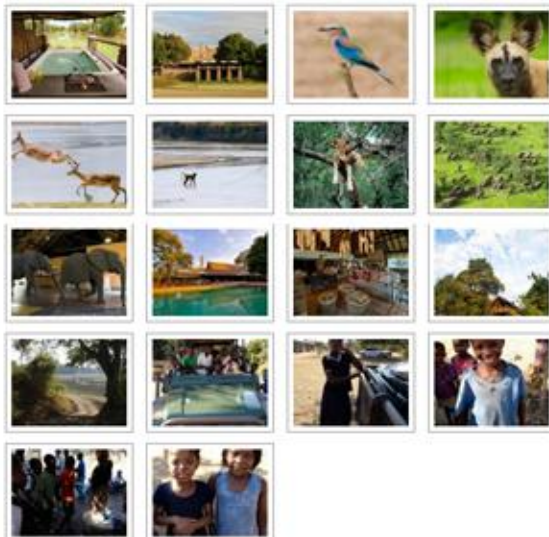
by Bekah Wright

Goodbye. The word catches in the throat. We'd said it a lot lately in the bush while moving between The Bushcamp Company's various camps. And now, we were making our way back to Mfuwe Lodge and, ultimately, out of the bush. Then home. Home. What a strange, faraway place that seemed.

The breathtaking, three-hour drive back to the lodge we'd heard so much about was just that. Yet, few words were spoken. The impalas went about their day. I'll admit, I was disappointed. Hadn't we bonded? Weren't they going to miss me as much as I them? The warthogs barely spared me a glance. The hyenas... Well, I'm pretty sure they were laughing hysterically over my rabbit poop escapade.

The terrain passed all too quickly and a familiar sign indicated we were back at Mfuwe Lodge. "After lunch..." Manda Chisanga, our guide began. We all nodded. Siesta. Yes, we knew the routine by heart now. "...You might want to visit the spa," he finished. Say what? Spa? It made perfect sense. The spa at Mfuwe Lodge was the perfect vehicle for midwifing us one step closer to civilization.

Later, whilst lying on a massage table in the open-air spa, I stared out at two hippos cooling off in the lagoon, my thoughts drifting to Chindeni Camp and the famous hippo duo there. Goodbye, Chindeni. Goodbye, hippos. Goodbye, Eden. "Miss..." a gentle pat alerted the massage was over. "You might want to take a nap back in your chalet. They've scheduled a visit to the schools en route to the airport this afternoon." Good idea, I thought, already halfway asleep. Back in the room, upon hitting the pillows, I was out.

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