

ESCAPE

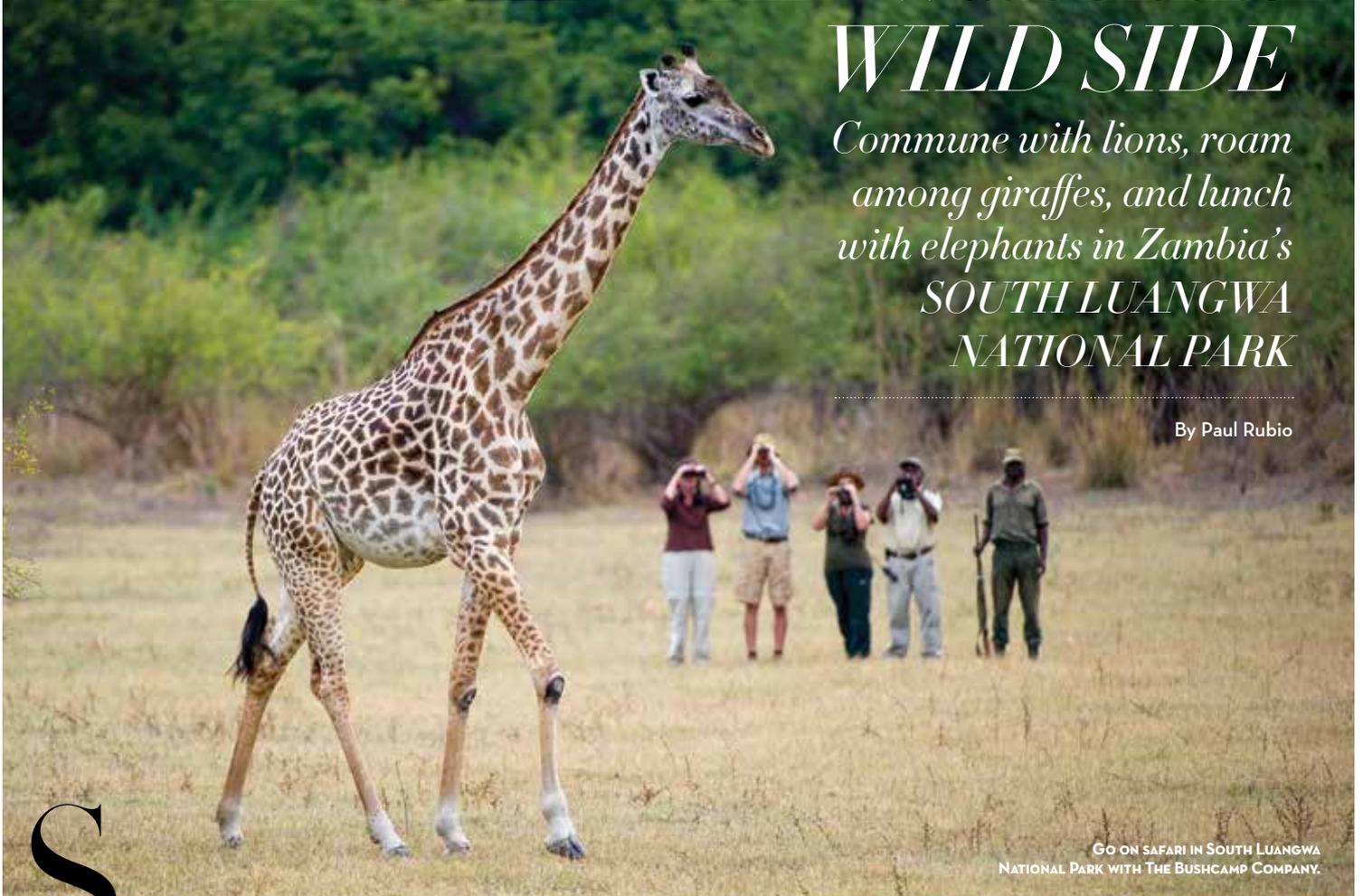


DANA ALLEN

Walk on the WILD SIDE

*Commune with lions, roam
among giraffes, and lunch
with elephants in Zambia's
SOUTH LUANGWA
NATIONAL PARK*

By Paul Rubio

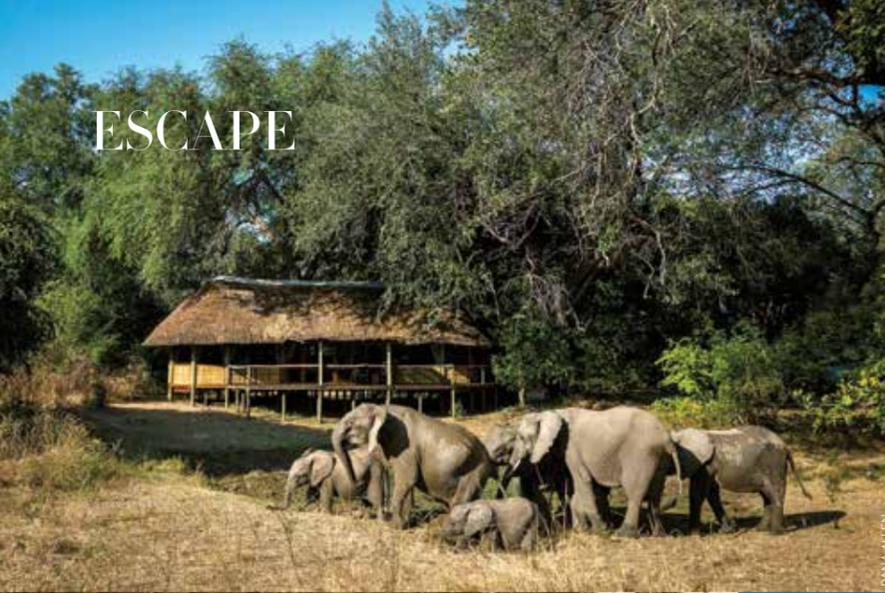


GO ON SAFARI IN SOUTH LUANGWA
NATIONAL PARK WITH THE BUSHCAMP COMPANY.

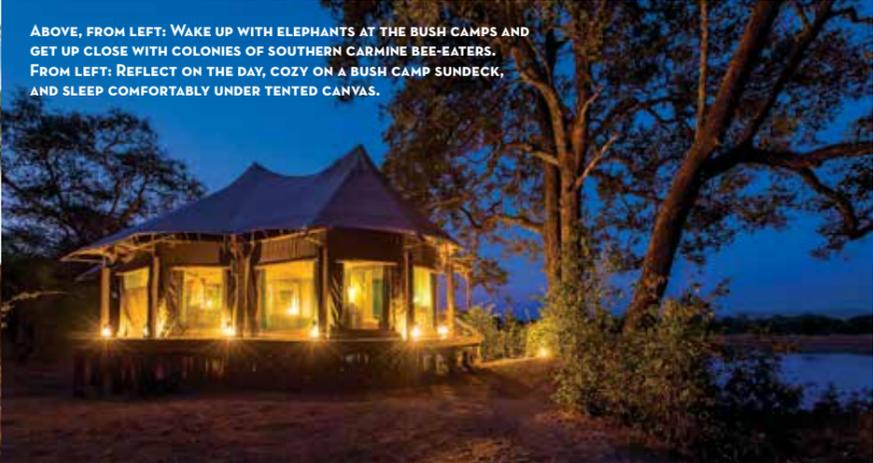
DANA ALLEN

Savvy travelers who want more than the safari standard for their next African adventure, pay close attention. The natural splendor of Zambia's South Luangwa National Park—and its excess of wildlife and breathtaking riverine landscapes—easily rivals that of more famous parklands such as

the Serengeti and Kruger. Yet, unlike its peers, South Luangwa promises a safari that branches beyond riveting game drives, prizeworthy photography, and epic sundowners. The game changer here are action-packed walking safaris that invite you to become one with Africa's vast animal kingdom.



CLOCKWISE FROM INSET: TRAVERSING THE PARK AMONG ELEPHANTS; A MALE LION MAKES HIS PRESENCE KNOWN; A WALKING SAFARI AT SUNSET; THE POOL AT MFUWE LODGE; DUELING WARTHOGS IN THE WILD.



ABOVE, FROM LEFT: WAKE UP WITH ELEPHANTS AT THE BUSH CAMPS AND GET UP CLOSE WITH COLONIES OF SOUTHERN CARMINE BEE-EATERS. FROM LEFT: REFLECT ON THE DAY, COZY ON A BUSH CAMP SUNDECK, AND SLEEP COMFORTABLY UNDER TENTED CANVASES.

As the original birthplace of the walking safari, South Luangwa has had more than 50 years to test the boundaries of man versus nature and perfect this highly ambitious activity. Nowadays, this region is hands down the continent's top spot to safely and completely immerse in the wildlife-rich plains, specifically through outfitter The Bushcamp Company.

In addition to the Mfuwe Lodge, The Bushcamp Company operates six intimate bush

camp—Kuyenda, Chamilandu, Chindeni, Bilimungwe, Kapamba, and Zungulila—strewn throughout the remote southern reaches of South Luangwa, over an expansive area to which the company carries the exclusive traversing rights. Collectively, they are certified as coveted *National Geographic* Unique Lodges of the World. Each maxes out at six or eight guests and delivers a similar aesthetic of rustic-chic over tented suites with more than enough creature comforts to keep content in the bush.

A typical morning at any camp begins at 5:30 with pre-dawn coffee, setting out for the day's walking safari before sunrise. The Bushcamp's seasoned guides, along with armed national park rangers, map out a path based on the recent sights and sounds of nature, so factors like animal calls, tracks, and dung all play a role. To be sure, they're not planning a leisurely, one-hour stroll to simply showcase the landscape and gaze at zebras from a football field away; they're strategizing to deliver a length-

ier, more hardcore outing. While the itinerary includes medicinal plant demos and discovery of Zambia's smaller critters, also expect to cross paths with elephants, giraffes, hippos, kudu, and even lions at distances short enough to make your heart skip a beat. It's the latter that forms the backbone of the South Luangwa walking safari. During these exhilarating yet precarious encounters, listen to your expert guide: He'll inform you when to remain quiet, stay completely still, drop to the ground, or head up a tree. True fight-or-flight moments should never materialize, but just the thought is enough to induce a lot of adrenaline.

While at Kapamba and Bilimungwe, my personal walking safari climaxed while observing a pride of lions, six strong, first sleeping along a dry riverbed (cue "The Lion Sleeps Tonight") and later disappearing for a presumed hunt. I was also privy to several hours with a colony of southern carmine bee-eaters, numbering some 1,000 individual birds, followed by contact with curious Thornicroft's giraffes and Crawshaw's zebras at close range. Daily morning walking sa-

faris were paired with afternoon game drives in which I honed my photography skills, snapping away at some of the 60 mammal species and 400 bird species found in the park. Night drives led to numerous leopard and bush baby sightings, followed by hearty meals back at camp that combined Western flair with local ingredients.

Yet another highlight was actually traveling from Kapamba to Bilimungwe on foot. In fact, it's possible to journey between five of the camps as extended walking safaris, thereby crossing as much of South Luangwa's diverse terrain as possible. Staff transport luggage and arrange a few surprises along the way—think pop-up "pizza in the bush," inclusive of a portable oven, every topping imaginable, and some chilled white wine to wash it all down.

Regardless of individual bush camps chosen, voyages with The Bushcamp Company

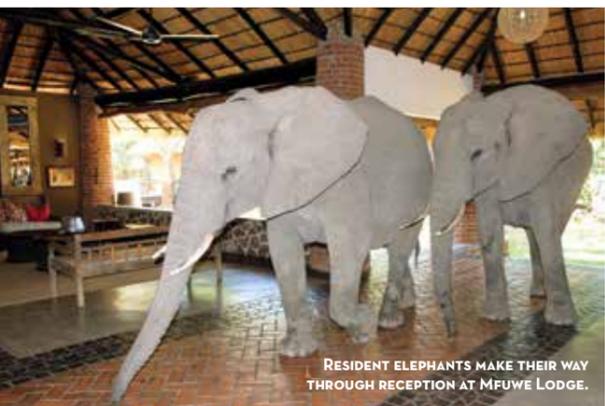
typically begin or end at the outfitter's award-winning lodge near the national park's entrance. Unlike the micro-camps, Mfuwe surfaces as a larger, 18-key luxury property—swimming pool, Wifi, and air-conditioning included—and the ideal place to transition from home life to safari life deep in the bush. To say the animal sightings around Mfuwe are excellent would be an understatement. They're so good that, at times, guests must vacate the lobby so elephants

can pass through reception to lunch on the surrounding mango trees. By day, crocodiles sunbathe next to your terrace, and at night, guards must shoo hippos away from the walking paths.

If looking beyond the more predictable, polished, and often crowded safaris of South and East Africa, try Zambia. The Bushcamp Company's South Luangwa experience exudes excitement and authenticity. It's a safari like no other—the ultimate walk on the wild side. (bushcampcompany.com)

VICTORIA FALLS *The Edge of Glory*

While in Zambia, keep the adrenaline pumping with thrill-seeking excursions across Victoria Falls. First, unwind from the bush at The Royal Livingstone Victoria Falls Zambia Hotel by Anantara. The colonial-inspired property shoulders the island-studded Zambezi River and takes full advantage of the sweeping views by way of room design—each has a river-facing veranda—



RESIDENT ELEPHANTS MAKE THEIR WAY THROUGH RECEPTION AT MFUWE LODGE.



MICROLIGHT FLIGHT OVER VICTORIA FALLS

ESCAPE



SWIM ON THE EDGE OF DEVIL'S POOL
AND PICNIC WITH ZEBRAS AT THE
ROYAL LIVINGSTON BY ANANTARA.



and well-positioned public areas like waterfront spa pavilions and restaurant Kubu. Since this luxury hotel is actually located within Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park, don't be surprised to wake up to giraffes, impala, and vervet monkeys at your doorstep or zebras grazing near the swimming pool.

Next, let the hotel organize all activities to consummate your Victoria Falls high. Be bold and venture to the razor's edge of the falls for a dip in Devil's Pool, a natural pool on the falls' precipice that requires a boat, ropes, endur-

ance, and lots of courage to reach. (Tip: Don't look down.) Dry off and later take to the skies on a two-person microlight flight—or a less-scary helicopter ride—chasing rainbows through the falls' flow and gaining the definitive bird's-eye view of this natural wonder. Brave the racing rapids of the falls-fed Zambezi River, which reach grade five (and sometimes up to an impossible six and seven) after rainy season. Or take a leap of faith and bungee jump 364 feet off the Victoria Falls Bridge.

Don't miss out on the tamer activities, either.

For optimal falls photos, tour the national park to discover plenty of look-out points. Go back in time over a nostalgia-rich, five-course dinner on The Royal Livingstone Express, a classic steam train that crosses the Victoria Falls Bridge. Or simply stick to the enticements on hotel grounds, enjoying a gourmet picnic lunch, relaxing by the pool, or splurging on a candlelit dinner under a monkey tree. After pushing your heart rate to the limit, day after day, you'll welcome the rush of modern luxuries. (anantara.com/en/royal-livingstone) ◀◀

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THE LIST?**

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